

PLATE I



MRS BESANT IN 1878

Mrs Annie Besant

a Modern Prophet

By

Theodore Besterman

London

Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd.

Broadway House: 68-74 Carter Lane, E.C.

1934

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY THE EDINBURGH PRESS, EDINBURGH

To
GERALD HEARD

O friend with the philosophic eye,
While cannons—and the politicians—thunder,
Still you gaze with scientific wonder
At ape and proton, moon and butterfly,
Still you transmit in watchful tones
The latest truth about sea-urchins' bones!
They say the pen is mightier than the sword:
Mightier than either is the microphonic word

Contents

CHAP.	PAGE
PREFACE	xi
I. BRIEF CHRONICLE	I
II. BACKGROUND	6
III. YOUNG RELIGION	11
IV. EDUCATION	19
V. MARRIAGE	30
VI. DOUBT IN THE VICTORIAN ERA	34
VII. THE TRIUMPH OF DOUBT	49
VIII. CHARLES BRADLAUGH	56
IX. ATHEISM	60
X. THE ORATOR	72
XI. BIRTH-CONTROL	81
XII. A CHRISTIAN FATHER	95
XIII. POLITICS AND SCIENCE.	101
XIV. SOCIAL PROTEST	107
XV. SOCIALISM	112
XVI. TRADE UNIONISM	124
XVII. FAITH RECAPTURED	129

CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
XVIII. THE SECRET DOCTRINE	137
XIX. H.P.B.	143
XX. THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY	158
XXI. THE NEW LIFE	168
XXII. ONWARD AND UPWARD	174
XXIII. THEOSOPHY	178
XXIV. INDIA: A NATION	191
XXV. THE BACK OF BEYOND	204
XXVI. ON STEPPING STONES	212
XXVII. "EARTHLY, SENSUAL, DEVILISH"	222
XXVIII. HIS MASTER'S VOICE	235
XXIX. PER ARDUA AD ASTRA	245
XXX. CHALLENGE	250
XXXI. PHOENIX NO MORE	258
XXXII. ABSTRACT	266
INDEX	271
THE WOOD-BESANT PEDIGREE	7

List of Illustrations

PLATE		PACING PAGE
1.	Mrs Besant in 1878	<i>Frontispiece</i>
2.	Mrs Besant and her Mother in 1867	28
3.	Mrs Besant and her Infant Digby in 1869	36
4.	Mrs Besant in 1869	48
5.	Mrs Besant in 1885	112
6.	Mrs Besant and the Strike Committee of the Matchmakers' Union in 1888	. 126
7.	Mrs Besant and Priests of the Liberal Catholic Church	. . . 236
8.	Mr J. Krishnamurti	254

Preface

THE reader will see that practically no references to authorities are given in the following pages. This is a practice which, as a general rule, I decidedly deprecate. In the present instance, however, having already published *A Bibliography of Annie Besant*, I have ventured to assume that the reader will credit me with knowledge of the sources.

While this book was passing through the press, the news of Mr C. W. Leadbeater's death reached England. In view of various passages in this book, and especially the appeal to Mr Krishnamurti, I learned of this event with real regret; but I eventually decided to leave the text as it stood.

I am indebted to the Council of the Society for Psychical Research for permission to quote from a long, interesting, and previously unpublished letter by Colonel Olcott about Mme Blavatsky; and to Mr A. D. Besant for permission to reproduce plates 2 and 3.

TH. B.

Mrs Annie Besant : A Modern Prophet

I

BRIEF CHRONICLE

ANNIE WOOD was born in London on Friday, the 1st of October 1847. She was able afterwards to remember the Great Exhibition of 1851, though she did not actually visit it. In the following year her father died, and in 1854 her mother moved to Harrow, where she founded a house for boys from the School. Annie, however, did not live there for long at that time, being temporarily adopted by Miss Marryat to be educated by her special system. During the first five of the seven years that she spent in Miss Marryat's care, Annie Wood lived with her at Fern Hill, a house near Charmouth, in Dorset. In the spring of 1861, when she was over 13, she was taken abroad by Miss Marryat to Antwerp, Aix-la-Chapelle and Bonn, and later on to Paris. The summer of 1862 she spent at Sidmouth and the winter in London. Miss Marryat now felt that her work was done and her pupil returned to her mother in Harrow, where she remained until the summer of 1866, with intervals in London and at St Leonards.

MRS ANNIE BESANT

Early in 1866 Annie first met the Rev. Frank Besant, in whose company she spent much time during the following summer, at the end of which she found herself engaged to him. In the autumn Annie went to Switzerland with friends, and in the following autumn to Manchester with her mother. The intervening year she spent in the usual social activities and in preparation for her marriage, which took place on the 28th of December 1867, when she was just over twenty years of age.

The quiet life of a clergyman-schoolmaster's wife, in strong contrast to that she had led hitherto, led her to seek an outlet for her energies in writing. And as Annie Besant's outstanding characteristic at this time was an intense piousness, it is not surprising to find as her first effort a work, which never saw the light, on the lives of the Black Letter Saints. She followed this up with several stories in *The Family Herald*, together with a novel which the Editor of that periodical rejected, finding it too political: the first hint of what was to come. Any developments of that sort were interrupted, however, by the birth in January 1869 of her son Arthur Digby, and of her daughter Mabel Emily in August 1870, as well as by the sudden financial distress of her mother. But an illness resulting from nursing her children through the whooping cough brought matters to a crisis.

For some time Mrs Besant had begun to question the truths of revealed religion, and under the influence of Charles Voysey and Thomas Scott she began to write pamphlets in which she gave expression to her

BRIEF CHRONICLE

doubts. These activities led to angry dissensions with her husband, with whom she had not succeeded in finding happiness. She would not consent to conform, even outwardly, to the conduct required of a clergyman's wife, and in the summer of 1873, at the age of nearly 26, she parted from her husband.

At first Annie Besant tried to earn her own living and that of her children by fancy needlework and by taking a post as a governess. In May 1874 Mrs Wood died and Annie Besant now felt free to follow her conscience wherever it might lead her. She continued to write pamphlets for Thomas Scott, eventually becoming, after making the acquaintance of Charles Bradlaugh, an uncompromising atheist. Her association with Bradlaugh led Mrs Besant into the field of politics and into that of social reform. The two colleagues took a stand, for instance, on their right to publish information regarding birth-control, their action leading to a sensational trial and to the writing by Annie Besant of a text-book on the subject, of which several hundred thousand copies were sold. These wider activities led her to the conclusion that her educational equipment was inadequate for her work, and she accordingly matriculated in the University of London and took first class certificates in various scientific subjects, as well as the preliminary B.Sc. examination.

Her political activities in support of Bradlaugh brought Mrs Besant into contact with socialist thought, to which she had become converted by the

MRS ANNIE BESANT

middle of 1884. She continued her atheist activities, but socialist propaganda took up more and more of her time. During the course of this work she made the acquaintance of W. T. Stead, by whom she was asked to review a book called *The Secret Doctrine*, by a Mme Blavatsky. This book converted Mrs Besant to Theosophy, and in May 1889 she joined the Theosophical Society. Bradlaugh, though strongly opposed to Socialism, tolerated his partner's activities in that sphere, but Theosophy he was unable to stomach, and after many months of patient waiting, fifteen years of close co-operation, years which had made Mrs Besant a brilliant orator, a fluent writer, an experienced propagandist, and an educated and experienced woman of the world, were brought to an end in December 1890.

Gradually Mrs Besant withdrew more and more into theosophical activities. She left the Fabian Society, withdrew the book on birth-control for which she had suffered so much, retired from the London School Board, and in 1893 left for India. She had irrevocably broken with the past. Henceforth her face was turned to the east.

After protracted and bitter controversies Mrs Besant became President of the Theosophical Society in 1907, being regularly re-elected thereafter. As soon as she became official leader of the theosophical movement Annie Besant began again to extend her activities. She fostered the notion that a young Indian was to incarnate the coming World-teacher, attempted to introduce Theosophy into the Roman

BRIEF CHRONICLE

Church, tried to join forces with Masonry, and generally sought to extend the influence of Theosophy. At the same time she passionately took up the causes of Indian independence and Indian education. These activities were crowned in 1917, when Mrs Besant was interned by the Government and elected President of the National Congress, and in 1921, when her Central Hindu College was merged with the Hindu University of Benares.

Mrs Besant was now 74 years of age, and, though her energy remained unimpaired for some years, her influence gradually waned. Many disciples fell away, including the World-teacher himself, and her last few years cannot have been very happy. She died on 20 September 1933.

II

BACKGROUND

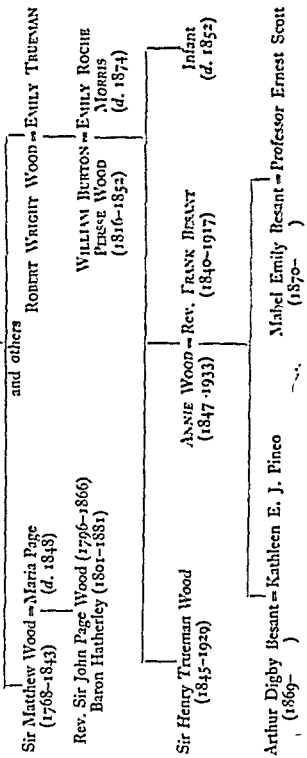
It is natural to feel some curiosity about the forbears of so striking a personality as was Annie Besant. What strains went to the making of so many-sided a character, the intermingling of what diverse breeds? These questions are not easy to answer, and so far as an answer *can* be given, it leaves us almost as puzzled as we were before.

Of Annie Besant's grandparents three were Irish. Her mother came of a relatively pure Irish family, the Maurices, though their name was now spelt Morris. Beyond duly priding themselves on their descent from kings, in this case the Milesian kings, and duly cherishing a parchment pedigree to prove the claim, the Morrises appear to have been in no way outstanding.

The Wood family, again, that of her father, though it produced several well-known men, shows no out-of-the-way qualities. It is a thoroughly typical English middle-class family of land-owning origins. After stagnating during two centuries, the family fortunes saw the beginning of a better day at the end of the eighteenth century, in common with all those who realised the possibilities of the coming commercial age. The revolution, in the case of the Wood family,

THE WOOD FAMILY

WILLIAM WOOD of Therton ~ CATHERINE CLUSE
(1738-1809) (d. 1798)



BACKGROUND

MRS ANNIE BESANT

was personified in Matthew Wood, who was born in 1768.

How familiar seems his career to anyone who knows the social evolution of England in the transition from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth! Educated at Blundell's Grammar School, and apprenticed at the age of fourteen to a relation, an Exeter merchant, he had succeeded before he reached the age of thirty in setting up for himself in London, a married man, as a chemist and druggist. Later he also became a hop merchant. So successful was he in these businesses and so devoted to public service, that his subsequent career reads like a City fairy-tale. A freeman of the City of London and a member of the company of fishmongers, he became in 1802 a common councillor for the Ward of Cripplegate Without, and later deputy-alderman and alderman. In 1809 he was appointed sheriff of London and Middlesex, and Lord Mayor of London for two periods, 1815-1817, as well as member for the City from 1817 to his death in 1843, retaining his seat through ten parliaments. Apart from this model career, Matthew Wood was a consistent friend of Queen Caroline's cause, and the Queen rewarded him with the first baronetcy she bestowed. His loyalty to Queen Caroline brought him a more solid reward, in the shape of a legacy of over £100,000 from an admirer.

Sir Matthew Wood had three sons. The first, the Rev. Sir John Page Wood, was a clergyman of no particular distinction; the reverend baronet's

BACKGROUND

youngest son became General Sir Evelyn Wood. Sir Matthew's second son, William Page Wood, became Lord Chancellor and Baron Hatherley; apart from his distinguished legal career he dabbled in theology, on which he produced several works. Sir Matthew's youngest son, Western Wood, was a business man and member of parliament.

Robert Wright Wood was Sir Matthew's younger brother, and a son of his, William Burton Persse Wood was Annie's father. In him we seem to note the first departure from the Wood tradition of solid normalcy. He was intended to be a doctor, but abandoned this career to go into business, it is not clear of what kind. Nevertheless he did not give up his interest in medicine, and this was eventually to lead to his death. Helping a medical friend in dissecting the body of a person who had died from consumption, he cut his finger, is thought himself to have caught the disease, and died from it. Mrs Besant tells us that he was a man of considerable and out-of-the-way attainments, not only a mathematician and a classical scholar, but also familiar with many modern languages, to say nothing of having a smattering of Hebrew and Gaelic. A thoroughgoing sceptic in religious matters, he amused himself by reading appropriate philosophy and poetry to his staunchly Church of England wife, and by driving still more religious relations out of the room by mocking at their faith. Mr Wood's mother and sister were Roman Catholics and brought a priest to his bedside during his fatal illness, but the dying man drove him away, with the unyielding determina-

MRS ANNIE BESANT

tion, just as heroic as the self-sacrifice of the religious martyr, so often shown by the convinced sceptic.

Apart from Annie herself, the Wood-Besant family continued on its strictly sound and conservative career. Its only recent members to attain any distinction have been wholly true to type. Annie's brother (a third child died in infancy) became Sir Henry Trueman Wood, for forty years Secretary of the Society of Arts, President of the Royal Photographic Society, Chairman of the London Board of the Eastman Kodak Company, and Chairman of the Express Dairy Company. Mrs Besant's son, Arthur Digby Besant, is well known as the highly respected chief officer of the Clerical, Medical and General Life Office, with which he has been connected since 1889.¹

¹ Mr Besant is the author of a valuable book, *The Besant Pedigree* (1930), to which I am indebted for some of the facts in the present section.

III

YOUNG RELIGION

SUCH being the dominant strain in Annie Besant's make-up, are we compelled to give up all hope of finding some starting-point for her eventual development? I think not. Annie's father clearly was something more than a plain Wood. His persistent devotion to doctoring, his wide interests and knowledge, his religious scepticism, all these things seem to indicate some rarer element in his blood. Nevertheless he did not object to his wife's pious inclinations, and Mrs Wood took free advantage of his tolerance, by indulging her bent towards the more emotional forms of religion; though she was not extreme in her views, she took her Christianity very seriously, and had a special admiration for such men as Stanley and Colenso. Yet she had a pronounced emotional and visionary strain. Annie records that her mother's hair turned from black to white in a single night after the death of her husband. On the day of the funeral, sitting at home, Mrs Wood is said to have followed clairvoyantly the details of the funeral service and procession, suddenly fainting with the words, "It is all over!" A few weeks later, going to the cemetery, she made her way direct to the grave without guidance. On another occasion she

MRS ANNIE BESANT

foretold the death of one of her children. Thus we can imagine the mental atmosphere in which Annie was brought up as a mixture of urbane scepticism and emotional, "supernatural" piety. Naturally imaginative, romantic, impulsive, a blend of the two influences was impossible for her. All or nothing was always her watchword.

Then, at an impressionable moment of her childhood, Mr Wood died. With him was lost all restraint on religion and emotion, and the death was, indeed, as we have seen, the signal for some of Mrs Wood's "clairvoyant" experiences. Now Annie was irresistibly drawn towards pious introspection. She tells us that she was between seven and eight years of age when she first came across some religious allegories for children, together with the *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Paradise Lost*. "Thenceforth my busy fancies," she wrote in after years, "carried me over into the fascinating world where boy-soldiers kept some outpost for their absent Prince, bearing a shield with his sign of a red cross on it; where devils shaped as dragons came sweeping down on the pilgrim, but were driven away defeated after hard struggle; where angels came and talked with little children, and gave them some talisman which warned them of coming danger, and lost its light if they were leaving the right path."

A little later these phantasies acquired a closer relation to the workaday world. Annie read of the Christian martyrs, and, she tells us, "passionately regretted I was born too late when no suffering for

YOUNG RELIGION

religion was practicable; I would spend many an hour in day-dreams, in which I stood before Roman judges, before Dominican Inquisitors, was flung to lions, tortured on the rack, burned at the stake; one day I saw myself preaching some great new faith to a vast crowd of people, and they listened and were converted, and I became a great religious leader." How instructive is this passage, and how self-revealing! It enables us to understand what happened immediately after this period, which belongs to the years between the death of Mr Wood and 1855, when Annie was eight years old.

It is probable that these day-dreams, common enough in children bred in religious homes, though not, perhaps, to the same pitch of intensity, would in time have ceased or been assimilated to exterior experience. But just at this point Miss Marryat came into the little girl's life. Under Miss Marryat's care there was no room for the picturesque, imaginative, rather "high" worship of her mother, nor for the vivid phantasies of her own religious musings. Miss Marryat was decidedly "low," evangelical, and even somewhat Calvinistic. There was no room here for dreams and lively fancies. Here all was sternness, prayer-meetings ("Now, Annie dear, will you speak to our Lord?"), "conscience," and "sin." All Annie's romantic phantasies were rigorously repressed, until Miss Marryat herself unwittingly gave them an opportunity to emerge with redoubled energy. This was in 1861 and 1862, when Miss Marryat took Annie and her fellow-pupils abroad.

MRS ANNIE BESANT

When in Paris Annie made the round of the Paris churches, and laboured strongly under "religious impressions."

Added to this circumstance was her confirmation, which took place at just this time. The confirmation was a solemn matter for her. The "careful preparation, the prolonged prayers, the wondering awe as to the 'seven-fold gifts of the Spirit,' which were to be given by the 'laying on of hands,' all tended to excitement. I could scarcely control myself as I knelt at the altar rails, and felt as though the gentle touch of the aged bishop, which fluttered for an instant on my bowed head, were the very touch of the wing of that 'Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove,' whose presence had been so earnestly invoked."

Annie Besant was later quite conscious, as these passages show, of the course and the causes of her religious development, though very characteristically this awareness never stopped her from regarding this development as produced by spiritual necessity. In regard to her return to emotional religion, for instance, Annie Besant later wrote: "This stay in Paris roused into activity an aspect of my religious nature that had hitherto been latent. I discovered the sensuous enjoyment that lay in introducing colour and fragrance and pomp into religious services, so that the gratification of the æsthetic emotions became dignified with the garb of piety. The picture-galleries of the Louvre, crowded with Madonnas and saints, the Roman Catholic churches with their incense-laden air and exquisite music, brought a new

YOUNG RELIGION

joy into my life, a more vivid colour to my dreams. Insensibly, the colder, cruder Evangelicalism that I had never thoroughly assimilated, grew warmer and more brilliant, and the ideal Divine Prince of my childhood took on the more pathetic lineaments of the Man of Sorrows, the deeper attractiveness of the suffering Saviour of Men. Keble's *Christian Year* took the place of *Paradise Lost*, and as my girlhood began to bud towards womanhood, all its deeper currents set in the direction of religious devotion. My mother did not allow me to read love stories, and my day-dreams of the future were scarcely touched by any of the ordinary hopes and fears of a girl lifting her eyes towards the world she is shortly to enter. They were filled with broodings over the days when girl-martyrs were blessed with visions of the King of Martyrs, when sweet St Agnes saw her celestial Bridegroom, and angels stooped to whisper melodies to St Cecilia's raptured ear. 'Why then and not now?' my heart would question, and I would lose myself in these fancies, never happier than when alone."

Such was Annie Besant's religious condition at this time. With it went great natural abilities and a good general education, as well as the inquisitive mind, which, as we shall see, it was the main function of Miss Marryat's educational system to foster. An emotional religious tendency in an intelligent and cultured person often leads to an interest in religious origins and doctrines. So it was with Annie Wood. She no longer read works of formal imagination:

MRS ANNIE BESANT

the Fathers were now her chief fare. Polycarp, Ignatius, Clement, Chrysostom, Augustine, these formed the confusing and indigestible reading of the girl of seventeen. To them she added such modern writers as Pusey, Liddon, and Keble, all, it will be noted, outstandingly connected with the Oxford Movement. Soon she "joyed" in the "great conception of a Catholic Church, lasting through the centuries, built on the foundations of apostles and martyrs, stretching from the days of Christ himself down to our own—'One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism.'"

Such thoughts came to hold a more and more prominent part in her mind, her devotional life centred round weekly communion, and soon her thoughts turned to the sacrifice of a religious life. Annie fasted, flagellated herself, and dreamed dreams.

Yet it must always be remembered that Annie Wood was not the usual callow schoolgirl. Her father's influence, though it had soon been cut short, Miss Marryat's educational system, and continental travel, had given her intellectual ballast. Just as *Paradise Lost* had been her favourite reading at one stage, and the Fathers and leaders of the Oxford Movement at another, as now she turned to a study of origins. All unsuspecting of the momentous consequences her inquiries would have, she thought of writing an account of the first Holy Week. Let her describe her feelings in her own words. In the Holy Week of 1866, when she was in her nineteenth year, Annie had been "trying to throw the mind back to the time when the commemorated events occurred,

YOUNG RELIGION

and to follow, step by step, the last days of the Son of Man, living, as it were, through those last hours, so that I might be ready to kneel before the cross on Good Friday, to stand beside the sepulchre on Easter Day. In order to facilitate the realization of those last sacred days of God incarnate on earth, working out man's salvation, I resolved to write a brief history of that week, compiled from the Four Gospels, meaning them [? then] to try and realize each day the occurrences that had happened on the corresponding date in A.D. 33, and so to follow those 'blessed feet' step by step, till they were ' . . . nailed for our advantage to the bitter cross.' With the fearlessness which springs from ignorance I sat down to my task."

The innocent girl ruled four columns on a sheet of paper, intended respectively for the account of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. "I became uneasy as I proceeded with my task, for discrepancies leaped at me from my four columns; the uneasiness grew as the contradictions increased, until I saw with a shock of horror that my 'harmony' was a discord, and a doubt of the veracity of the story sprang up like a serpent hissing in my face. It was struck down in a moment, for to me to doubt was sin, and to have doubted on the very eve of the Passion was an added crime. Quickly I assured myself that these apparent contradictions were necessary as tests of faith, and I forced myself to repeat Tertullian's famous 'Credo quia impossibile,' till, from a wooden recital, it became a triumphant affirmation. I reminded myself

MRS ANNIE BESANT

that St Peter had said of the Pauline Epistles that in them were 'some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest . . . unto their own destruction.' I shudderingly recognized that I must be very unlearned and unstable to find discord among the Holy Evangelists, and imposed on myself an extra fast as penance for my ignorance and lack of firmness in the faith. For my mental position was one to which doubt was one of the worst of sins."

So Annie Wood repressed her first doubts, but doubts can be repressed no more than can religious inclinations. Had it not been for an important event which occurred just at this time, Annie's later career might again have been more normal. But before we turn to this event, let us consider more closely a subject which has already been referred to more than once, Annie's intellectual and moral training by Miss Marryat, one of the most important influences in her life.

IV

EDUCATION

Of Miss Marryat very little is known directly, beyond the facts that she was a sister of Captain Marryat, the novelist, and possessed of considerable means.¹ She was interested in the education of children, an interest started by the adoption, as a wealthy and lonely woman, of one of her nieces in order to bring her up. She happened to call on Mrs Wood, who had just then started her house at Harrow, and so made the acquaintance of Annie. Thinking that it might be easier to educate two little girls than one, and knowing of Mrs Wood's circumstances, she made the suggestion to her that Annie should be put unreservedly into her hands, only returning to her mother for holidays. At first, writes Mrs Besant, "my mother would not hear of it, for she and I scarcely ever left each other; my love for her was an idolatry, hers for me a devotion. (A foolish little story, about which I was unmercifully teased for years, marked that absolute idolatry for her, which has not yet faded from my heart. In tenderest rallying one day of the child who trotted after her everywhere, content to sit, or stand, or wait, if only

¹ She must not be confused with Florence Marryat, the popular novelist and spiritualist, who was Captain Marryat's daughter.

MRS ANNIE BESANT

she might touch hand or dress of 'mamma,' she said: 'Little one' (the name by which she always called me), 'if you cling to mamma in this way, I must really get a string and tie you to my apron, and how will you like that?' 'O mamma, darling,' came the fervent answer, 'do let it be in a knot.' And, indeed, the tie of love between us was so tightly knotted that nothing ever loosened it till the sword of Death cut that which pain and trouble never availed to slacken in the slightest degree). But it was urged upon her that the advantages of education offered were such as no money could purchase for me, that it would be a disadvantage for me to grow up in a houseful of boys—and, in truth, I was as good a cricketer and climber as the best of them—that my mother would soon be obliged to send me to school, unless she accepted an offer which gave me every advantage of school without its disadvantages. At last she yielded, and it was decided that Miss Marryat, on returning home, should take me with her."

Thus it was that Annie found herself, at the age of eight, at home in a large house, Fern Hill, in Dorsetshire. Here there were in Miss Marryat's care, her little niece, Annie Wood, a little boy, together with other children who came from time to time on a more temporary footing. "Auntie," as the children called her, taught them everything except music, for which there was a special master. It would have been interesting to know the extent of Miss Marryat's qualifications for this considerable task, but whether

EDUCATION

they were adequate or not, at least her energy clearly was ample and her methods decidedly interesting. She practised the children in composition, in recitation, in reading aloud English, French and German, doing everything in the most thoroughgoing manner. "No words of mine," wrote Mrs Besant many years after, "can tell how much I owe her, not only of knowledge, but of that knowledge which has remained with me ever since as a constant spur to study."

Let us look a little closer at Miss Marryat's methods, as described by Mrs Besant. She never, it seems, used a spelling-book or an English grammar. The children were made to write letters to each other, describing what they had seen in their walks; or they had to re-tell a story recently read. Then, taking these compositions as her texts, Miss Marryat would hold forth on spelling, grammar and style, correcting mistakes and suggesting improvements. Mrs Besant describes how Miss Marryat brought out the faculty of observation in her charges. "'O, dear! I have nothing to say!' would come from a small child, hanging over a slate. 'Did you not go out for a walk yesterday?' Auntie would question. 'Yes,' would be sighed out, but there's nothing to say about it.' 'Nothing to say! And you walked in the lanes for an hour and saw nothing, little No-eyes? You must use your eyes better today.'"

Some further details of Miss Marryat's educational ideas deserve a full quotation from Mrs Besant's account. "We used to write out lists of all the words we could think of which sounded the same but were

MRS ANNIE BESANT

differently spelt. Thus: 'key, quay,' 'knight, night,' and so on, and great was the glory of the child who found the largest number. Our French lessons—as the German later—included reading from the very first. On the day on which we began German we began reading Schiller's *William Tell*, and the verbs given us to copy out were those that had occurred in the reading. We learned much by heart, but always things that in themselves were worthy to be learned. We were never given the dry questions and answers which lazy teachers so much affect. We were taught history by one reading aloud while the others worked—the boys as well as the girls learning the use of the needle. 'It's like a girl to sew,' said a little fellow, indignantly, one day. 'It is like a baby to have to run after a girl if you want a button sewn on,' quoth Auntie. Geography was learned by painting skeleton maps—an exercise much delighted in by small fingers—and by putting together puzzle maps, in which countries in the map of a continent, or counties in the map of a country, were always cut out in their proper shapes. I liked big empires in those days; there was a solid satisfaction in putting down Russia, and seeing what a large part of the map was filled up thereby.

"The only grammar that we ever learned as grammar was the Latin, and that not until composition had made us familiar with the use of the rules therein given. Auntie had a great horror of children learning by rote things they did not understand, and then fancying they knew them. 'What do you mean by

EDUCATION

that expression, Annie?’ she would ask me. After feeble attempts to explain, I would answer: ‘Indeed, Auntie, I know in my own head, but I can’t explain.’ ‘Then, indeed, Annie, you do not know in your own head, or you could explain, so that I might know in my own head.’ And so a healthy habit was fostered of clearness of thought and of expression. The Latin grammar was used because it was more perfect than the modern grammars, and served as a solid foundation for modern languages.”

We have already seen something of Miss Marryat’s religious ideas, but the subject must be amplified for the light it throws on Annie’s educative influences. Miss Marryat, however advanced in her educational methods, was in many respects a Victorian of the Victorians. She became a “centre of beneficence,” started a Sunday School, opened a Bible Class, visited the poor, and was full of good works. A characteristic feature of her character was the fact that she hardly ever gave money; work and food she would do her best to provide, but money, no. One wonders whether she would have maintained these principles today?

On Sunday the children were allowed to read no books but the Bible and the *Sunday at Home*, neither of which, one presumes, Miss Marryat regarded strictly as “books.” She would make up for this deprivation by “various little devices,” a walk in the garden, the singing of hymns, telling stories about Moffat and Livingstone, learning by heart passages from the Bible and hymns. A favourite occupation

MRS ANNIE BESANT

was the reading by Miss Marryat of various descriptions out of the Bible, which the children had to try and recognize. How "good" become even the most downright games if bent to pious purposes!

Then the children were made to teach in Auntie's Sunday School, "for Auntie would tell us that it was useless for us to learn if we did not try to help those who had no one to teach them." Even in this, however, Miss Marryat was sensible enough to try, according to her lights, to sow the good seed in the minds of her children. "The Sunday-school lessons had to be carefully prepared on the Saturday, for we were always taught that work given to the poor should be work that cost something to the giver. This principle, regarded by her as an illustration of the text, 'Shall I give unto the Lord my God that which has cost me nothing?' ran through all her precept and her practice. When in some public distress we children went to her crying, and asking whether we could not help the little children who were starving, her prompt reply was, 'What will you give up for them?' And then she said that if we liked to give up the use of sugar, we might thus each save sixpence a week to give away. I doubt if a healthier lesson can be given to children than that of personal self-denial for the good of others." And who knows, was not Miss Marryat perhaps wiser in her generation than we in ours?

It must not be supposed that Annie's life was by any means drab on weekdays. The lessons were obviously enough pleasant and interesting, and after

EDUCATION

lessons there were walks and rides in the beautiful Charmouth country, and all the pleasures to a child of a big house with ample grounds. Yet it is clear both from Mrs Besant's own description of her life with Miss Marryat and from her later development, as we have already seen, that it was the restrictions and dulness of Evangelicalism which made the deepest impression on the romantic and passionate child. This impression was developed by their visit abroad, which began in the spring of 1861. Miss Marryat wanted to accompany a nephew to Düsseldorf, to an eye specialist, and decided to take Annie and another little girl abroad with her. Here, by the way, we may note a characteristic feature of Mrs Besant's character, that she tells us practically nothing of her childhood playmates. Of the girl with whom she spent so many months in the closest companionship on the Continent, we are given practically nothing but a name, Emma Mann, and one brief description of her appearance in order to contrast it with her own.

The little party sailed from London to Antwerp, then as today one of the most pleasant approaches to Northern and Central Europe, and thence to Aix-la-Chapelle and Bonn. Let Mrs Besant describe what happened there in her own words. "Our experiences in Bonn were not wholly satisfactory. Dear Auntie was a maiden lady, looking on all young men as wolves to be kept far from her growing lambs. Bonn was a university town, and there was a mania just then prevailing there for all things English.

MRS ANNIE BESANT

Emma was a plump, rosy, fair-haired typical English maiden, full of frolic and harmless fun; I a very slight, pale, black-haired girl, alternating between wild fun and extreme pensiveness. In the boarding-house to which we went at first—the ‘Château du Rhin,’ a beautiful place overhanging the broad blue Rhine—there chanced to be staying the two sons of the late Duke of Hamilton, the Marquis of Douglas and Lord Charles, with their tutor. They had the whole drawing-room floor; we a sitting-room on the ground floor and bedrooms above. The lads discovered that Miss Marryat did not like her ‘children’ to be on speaking terms with any of the ‘male sect.’ Here was a fine course of amusement. They would make their horses caracole on the gravel in front of our window; they would be just starting for their ride as we went for walk or drive, and would salute us with doffed hat and low bow; they would waylay us on our way downstairs with demure ‘Good morning’; they would go to church and post themselves so that they could survey our pew, and Lord Charles—who possessed the power of moving at will the whole skin of the scalp—would wriggle his hair up and down till we were choking with laughter, to our own imminent risk. After a month of this Auntie was literally driven out of the pretty château, and took refuge in a girls’ school, much to our disgust; but still she was not allowed to rest. Mischievous students would pursue us wherever we went; sentimental Germans, with gashed cheeks, would whisper complimentary phrases as we passed; mere

EDUCATION

boyish nonsense of the most harmless kind, but the rather stern English lady thought it 'not proper,' and after three months of Bonn we were sent home for the holidays, somewhat in disgrace."

After a couple of months at home the two girls went out to Miss Marryat in Paris, where they spent seven months. In the summer of 1862 Annie was prepared by Miss Marryat for their coming separation, for Auntie felt that her educational task was now approaching its end. More and more she left the girl to herself, teaching her to stand on her own feet. "And," says Mrs Besant, "I venture to say that this gentle withdrawal of constant supervision and teaching was one of the wisest and kindest things that this noble-hearted woman ever did for us." In the winter of that year Annie spent some months with Miss Marryat in London, and then, at the age of sixteen and a half, she returned for good to her mother.

Thus suddenly withdrawn from the discipline of Miss Marryat's care it is to be feared that for the next two and a half years she was sadly spoiled by her mother, who evidently thought that music, archery, and croquet were sufficient occupation for the young girl. Mrs Besant herself says of her mother that she "never allowed a trouble of any kind to touch me, and cared only that all worries should fall on her, all joys on me. I know now what I never dreamed then, that her life was one of serious anxiety. The heavy burden of my brother's school and college life pressed on her constantly, and her need of money was often serious. A lawyer whom she trusted

MRS ANNIE BESANT

absolutely cheated her systematically, using for his own purposes the remittances she made for payment of liabilities, thus keeping upon her a constant drain. Yet for me all that was wanted was ever there. Was it a ball to which we were going? I need never think of what I would wear till the time for dressing arrived, and there laid out ready for me was all I wanted, every detail complete from top to toe. No hand but hers must dress my hair, which, loosed, fell in dense curly masses nearly to my knees; no hand but hers must fasten dress and deck with flowers, and if I sometimes would coaxingly ask if I might not help by sewing in laces, or by doing some trifle in aid, she would kiss me and bid me run to my books or my play, telling me that her only pleasure in life was caring for her 'treasure.'

"Alas! how lightly we take the self-denying labour that makes life so easy, ere yet we have known what life means when the protecting motherwing is withdrawn. So guarded and shielded had been my childhood and youth from every touch of pain and anxiety that love could bear for me, that I never dreamed that life might be a heavy burden, save as I saw it in the poor I was sent to help; all the joy of those happy years I took, not ungratefully I hope, but certainly with as glad unconsciousness of anything rare in it as I took the sunlight. Passionate love, indeed, I gave to my darling, but I never knew all I owed her till I passed out of her tender guardianship, till I left my mother's home. Is such training wise? I am not sure. It makes the ordinary roughnesses of life come



MRS BESANT AND HER MOTHER IN 1867

EDUCATION

with so stunning a shock, when one goes out into the world, that one is apt to question whether some earlier initiation into life's sterner mysteries would not be wiser for the young. Yet it is a fair thing to have that joyous youth to look back upon, and at least it is a treasury of memory that no thief can steal in the struggles of later life."

We can now form an adequate idea of the mental and moral development of Annie Wood at this time. It is clear that she was not well educated in the sense of possessing a systematic body of knowledge on any substantial subject. Miss Marryat no doubt felt that she had done her duty when she had taught the girl how to speak well, to write sensibly and intelligibly, to play the piano tolerably, to know French and German, to observe, to cultivate an inquiring mind, to be charitable, and to worship her Maker. In this she had succeeded, for good or ill, and thus Annie became a citizen of the world, a perfectly adequate member of Society in the narrow sense, but almost totally ignorant of the duties and responsibilities of life in the wider society of men and women. Accustomed to comfort and even luxury, suffering was little more than a word to her, as were, indeed, so many more of those words which at that time young women were protected from.

V

MARRIAGE

THIS was the Annie Wood of the year following her eighteenth birthday. She was deeply and emotionally religious. How right was her mother when, shortly before her death, she said to her daughter, who had then already embarked on her freethought career, "My little one, you have never made me sad or sorry except for your own sake; you have always been too religious"! With this intense religiosity she had considerable intellectual curiosity, a well-stocked mind, endless determination, and much self-confidence. When she repressed her first religious doubts, her feelings, as so often happens, only became the more fervent and unreasoning. As her sexual feelings awakened, distorted as they were by complete ignorance of sexual matters, they joined with the repressed emotional religious feelings, to produce phantasies of a pronouncedly erotic kind. She was "absorbed in that passionate love of 'the Saviour' which, among emotional Catholics, really is the human passion of love transferred to an ideal." Here we have again that phenomenon which recurs again and again in Annie Besant's life, a true intellectual understanding of a situation, wholly untinged by introspection or application to herself.

MARRIAGE

Here are some of the prayers daily uttered by Annie Wood at this time:

"O, Jesu, beloved, fairer than the sons of men, draw me after Thee with the cords of Thy Love."

"Blessed art Thou, O most merciful God, who didst vouchsafe to espouse me to the heavenly Bridegroom in the waters of baptism, and hast imparted Thy body and blood as a new gift of espousal and the meet consummation of Thy love."

"O most sweet Lord Jesu, transfix the affections of my inmost soul with that most joyous and most healthful wound of Thy love, with true, serene, most holy, apostolical charity; that my soul may ever languish and melt with entire love and longing for Thee. Let it desire Thee and faint for Thy courts; long to be dissolved and be with Thee."

"O, that I could embrace Thee with that most burning love of angels."

"Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth; for Thy love is better than wine. Draw me, we will run after Thee. The king hath brought me into his chambers. . . . Let my soul, O Lord, feel the sweetness of Thy presence. May it taste how sweet Thou art. . . . May the sweet and burning power of Thy love, I beseech Thee, absorb my soul."

When these convergent strands in Annie Wood's life are considered, does it not seem almost inevitable that she should have imagined herself in love with the young curate she met during that same Easter which saw the birth and repression of her first doubts? At any rate, so it was. The Rev. Frank Besant was just

MRS ANNIE BESANT

down from Cambridge (he had just delivered his first sermon), a member of a respectable and even distinguished family, of which he was a typical representative. His eldest brother had been a Senior Wrangler; another brother, Walter, later Sir Walter Besant, the novelist, was eighteenth Wrangler; he himself was twenty-eighth Wrangler in his year. Nevertheless he was too unenterprising to elect for one of the more active professions, and he took orders. His later life was totally undistinguished, apart from his production of a competent transcription of the Parish register of Boston, in Lincolnshire. Such was the man Annie Wood met at the moment of her grave emotional crisis; and when Mr Besant himself was sufficiently attracted by the adoring girl to follow her that summer to St Leonards, the rest was a foregone conclusion. At the end of their holidays they were betrothed. Annie Besant afterwards maintained that the engagement had been entered into without her consent, Mr Besant taking this for granted as they had been so much together. This version may be gravely doubted. Annie was not a girl to remain engaged to a man for two years, and to marry him, on so very fine a point of etiquette. However this may be, engaged she was and, in December 1867, duly married.

A more unsuitable marriage can hardly be conceived. The dull, unimaginative curate was no companion and no match for the fiery girl, of feeling and imagination all compact. He had "very high ideas of a husband's authority and a wife's submission,

MARRIAGE

holding strongly to the 'master-in-my-own-house theory,' thinking much of the details of home arrangements, precise, methodical, easily angered and with difficulty appeased." She had been for many years without a father's authority, brought up by an indulgent mother and a tolerably libertarian teacher, untrained and inexperienced in domestic matters, unused to worries of any kind, and free to indulge as she chose her fancies and impulses. "Hardness aroused first incredulous wonder, then a storm of indignant tears, and after a time a proud, defiant resistance, cold and hard as iron." She was "scared and outraged" by the impact of sexual life on her ignorance and idealizing tendencies, and no doubt made a most unsatisfactory wife.

W. T. Stead long after most happily hit off the situation by saying of Mrs Besant, that "she could not be the bride of Heaven, and therefore became the bride of Mr Frank Besant. He was hardly an adequate substitute." It would not have been surprising if the failure of the Heaven-surrogate had led to the failure of Heaven itself. And perhaps this effect was at once produced subconsciously. But at first Annie Besant still struggled to keep her faith, seeking for an outlet for her energies and dissatisfactions in writing.

VI

DOUBT IN THE VICTORIAN ERA

It is probably true that if Mrs Besant's marriage had been happy, she would have been content with the tasks of the vicarage and the parish, and with the care of her two children. Yet it is not the whole truth to say that unhappiness and dissatisfaction led her to take up writing, though this impression was fostered by Mrs Besant herself. Actually she had begun to write in 1866, many months before her marriage. At that time, when she was herself fasting and flagellating, she wrote *A Paper on the Duty of Fasting*, and it is a significant fact that her betrothed actually copied out in his own hand, and annotated, this essay and that it was published in 1870, after their marriage. The fact is significant, as suggesting that Mr Besant was not so intolerant of his wife's literary activities as the latter tells us. It would certainly have seemed to be so if we had known no more; but the true circumstances illustrate once more how misleading a mere fact can be in itself when divorced from its context. For, although Mr Besant undoubtedly countenanced Annie's first literary effort, his reasons for doing so are quite another matter. These reasons emerge from a copy (in Mr Digby Besant's possession) of another paper, on *Fasting Communion*, also written by Annie

DOUBT IN THE VICTORIAN ERA

Wood in 1866 and also transcribed by Mr Besant. This second paper was never published and bears the following endorsement in Mr Besant's hand: "I would not publish this, thinking that she ought to be satisfied with publication of preceding pamphlet"! ¹

Needless to say, Mrs Besant was *not* "satisfied." Almost immediately after her marriage she began to write once more and with redoubled seriousness. Oddly enough, perhaps to avoid offending her husband, she at first tried her hand at fiction. She wrote several short stories which were accepted by *The Family Herald*, and not only accepted but paid for, and, what is more, published. I have not troubled to identify more than one of these lucubrations in a medium so unsuited to Mrs Besant's gifts; this story, "Sunshine and Shade.—A Tale founded on Fact," appeared in the issue of *The Family Herald* for 2 May 1868, over the initials "A.W." It opens by reproducing the musings of a young man as he rides up to pay a visit: "I wonder if she will be much altered . . . she was a sweet little child: but then she had not been schooled by French governesses and taught to repress all feeling as improper, and check every free natural impulse." Is it fanciful to perceive an element of autobiography in this first paragraph of Annie Besant's first story? And the title, is it not an allusion to her own childish nickname, "Sunshine"? And is there not something intensely personal in this whole story of true love ("Two months had passed

¹ These important particulars are taken from Mr Digby Besant's *The Besant Pedigree* (1930).

MRS ANNIE BESANT

since their marriage, passed like a dream of joy, and Evelyn looked more radiantly beautiful than ever, and her young husband was almost her lover still”), when we remember that Annie Besant actually wrote it about two months after her marriage? After these two months of bliss Evelyn meets with an accident and is paralysed. Here, too, is there not a symbol of Annie’s own experience of marriage, its crippling effect on her soarings, hopes and ideals?

So encouraged was Mrs Besant by the publication of her stories that she proceeded to write a novel. But here she received a check, the editor of *The Family Herald*¹ finding it too political for his pages and asking for one of “purely domestic interest.” In the meanwhile, however, she had returned to theology by writing no less a work than the lives of the black letter saints, that is, of those whose names are not printed in red in the Church of England Calendar, and thus are not Red Letter Saints. The book was sent to Messrs Macmillan, who forwarded it to a religious fraternity, which offered to publish it if the MS. were given to them as an “act of piety,” piety being in this case evidently regarded as synonymous with charity. The fate of this work cannot be traced.

Mrs Besant’s literary career was now cut short by the birth, in successive years, 1869 and 1870, of her

¹ *The Family Herald: A Domestic Magazine of Useful Information and Amusement, containing Tales, Narratives, Adventures, Allegories, Fables, Aphorisms, Poetry, Philosophy, Science, Art, Customs, Manners, Historical Essays, Remarkable Events, Curious Ceremonies, Natural History, New Inventions, Recent Discoveries, Biography, Sketches, Anecdotes, Epigrams, Quips, Cranks, Statistics, Recipes, Facts, Hints, Cautions, Proverbs, Pastimes, Experiments, Problems, Questions, Riddles, Jokes.*



MRS BESANT AND HER INFANT DIGBY
IN 1869



DOUBT IN THE VICTORIAN ERA

two children, Arthur Digby and Mabel Emily, and the illness of both children, particularly of Mabel, in the spring of 1871. But it was the suffering of her children and herself during the course of that illness which eventually led directly to her definite break with her husband and with religion. "It was the long months of suffering through which I had been passing, with the seemingly purposeless torturing of my little one as a climax, that struck the first stunning blow at my belief in God as a merciful Father of men. I had been visiting the poor a good deal, and had marked the patient suffering of their lives; my idolized mother had been defrauded by a lawyer she had trusted, and was plunged into debt by his non-payment of the sums that should have passed through his hands to others; my own bright life had been enshrouded by pain and rendered to me degraded by an intolerable sense of bondage; and here was my helpless, sinless babe tortured for weeks and left frail and suffering. The smooth brightness of my previous life made all the disillusionment more startling, and the sudden plunge into conditions so new and so unfavourable dazed and stunned me. My religious past became the worst enemy of the suffering present. All my personal belief in Christ, all my intense faith in His constant direction of affairs, all my habit of continual prayer and of realization of His Presence—all were against me now. The very height of my trust was the measure of the shock when the trust gave way. To me He was no abstract idea, but a living reality, and all my heart rose up against

MRS ANNIE BESANT

this Person in whom I believed, and whose individual finger I saw in my baby's agony, my own misery, the breaking of my mother's proud heart under a load of debt, and all the bitter suffering of the poor.

"The presence of pain and evil in a world made by a good God; the pain falling on the innocent, as on my seven-months'-old babe; the pain begun here reaching on into eternity unhealed; a sorrow-laden world; a lurid, hopeless hell; all these, while I still believed, drove me desperate, and instead of like the devils believing and trembling, I believed and hated. All the hitherto dormant and unsuspected strength of my nature rose up in rebellion; I did not yet dream of denial, but I would no longer kneel."

During the early stages of these renewed doubts Mr Besant brought an elder clergyman to see his wife. They had an interview, and afterwards he wrote her a letter which she describes as "noble," which it may be, but which undoubtedly was singularly unhelpful. She felt hopeless, quarrelled bitterly with her husband, and contemplated suicide. The bottle of poison was already raised to her lips, when she heard "as though the words were spoken softly and clearly," a voice saying: "O coward, coward, who used to dream of martyrdom, and cannot bear a few short years of pain!"¹

Long-continued self-torture of this kind at last produced a break-down in health, during which she

¹ This incident is recorded in Mrs Besant's *Autobiography* (1893), written after she had joined the Theosophical Society, but not in *Autobiographical Sketches* (1885), published at the height of her freethought career. A comparison of the two works is often instructive.

DOUBT IN THE VICTORIAN ERA

"lay for weeks helpless and prostrate in raging and unceasing headpain, unable to sleep, unable to bear the light, lying like a log on the bed, not unconscious, but indifferent to everything, consciousness centred, as it were, in the ceaseless pain." From what we already know of the Rev. Frank Besant it is not difficult to imagine that all this fuss and distress in no wise appealed to him. That a young woman, a wife (and of a clergyman at that!), and a mother, should trouble herself to desperation with religious doubts, when she had her husband, her children and her home to attend to, must have seemed monstrous to him. Dissensions grew more pronounced, and were not in the least alleviated by Mrs Besant's determination, on recovering from her illness, to make a systematic examination of Christian dogma, item by item, so that she might at least find *something* on which she could rest securely. Four chief problems concerned her:

"(1) The eternity of punishment after death.

"(2) The meaning of 'goodness' and 'love,' as applied to a God who had made this world, with all its sin and misery.

"(3) The nature of the atonement of Christ, and the 'justice' of God in accepting a vicarious righteousness from the sinner.

"(4) The meaning of 'inspiration' as applied to the Bible, and the reconciliation of the perfections of the author with the blunders and immoralities of the work."

MRS ANNIE BESANT

The result of these inquiries was a foregone conclusion. When one who has been a passionately and emotionally convinced believer begins to question such dogmas as these, there can be no two answers. Nevertheless, it is evident that Mrs Besant was not yet prepared entirely to give up her beliefs and her duties as a clergyman's wife. On the contrary, she now took a step which made her position still more difficult. Up to this time Mr Besant had held an assistant mastership at Cheltenham, where at any rate none of the ordinary parish tasks fell on his wife. But now Mrs Besant petitioned her eminent relation, Baron Hatherley, for a Crown living to be given to her husband. He agreed and early in 1872 Mrs Besant removed to Sibsey, in Lincolnshire, to the vicarage of which Mr Besant was duly instituted.

The position was now much aggravated for both of them. The parish was large and sparsely populated, so that Mrs Besant could not play the customary part of the parson's wife, and consequently had ample time on her hands for deliberation on her troubles and doubts. Mr Besant, on his side, now established at the head of a domain all his own, was able to give free rein to all those characteristics which so distinguished him from his wife. With admirable precision he had begun to keep a detailed record of his sermons, No. 1 having been delivered at St Barnabas's, South Kensington, on 11 February 1866; half-a-century later the record was still being kept, the last entry relating to sermon No. 3110, preached in Sibsey Church on 18 March 1917, not

DOUBT IN THE VICTORIAN ERA

long before his death. He kept meticulous accounts, all income being recorded both as gross and as net items. The entry in his diary relating to the birth of his son and first child reads: "2 a.m. went for Doctor W. 9.10 a.m. child born. 10 a.m. Doctor W. left," and in his "Register of Services" is entered: "St Philip and St James, Cheltenham. During afternoon service Baptism of Arthur Digby Besant and two other infants. No fee." It requires no vivid imagination to picture the development of such characteristics in the parish and in the home.

At any rate Mrs Besant's doubts did not cease, nor did she cease to take them seriously. The clergyman previously mentioned continued to write to her, but all to no purpose, and she read Robertson, Stopford Brooke, Stanley, Greg, Matthew Arnold, Liddon, Mansel, Ewing, Grey, and others, with no better result. She was blindly struggling she knew not whither, when at last there came some hope. In the autumn of 1872 she was in London with her mother, and took her way one morning to St George's Hall, where she found that the Rev. Charles Voysey was preaching. To her delight Mrs Besant found "on listening to the sermon and buying some literature on sale in the ante-room, that there were people who had passed through my own difficulties, and had given up the dogmas that I found so revolting. I went again on the following Sunday, and when the service was over I noticed that the outgoing stream of people were passing by Mr and Mrs Voysey, and that many who were evidently

MRS ANNIE BESANT

strangers spoke a word of thanks to him as they went on. Moved by a strong desire, after the long months of lonely striving, to speak to one who had struggled out of Christian difficulties, I said to Mr Voysey, as I passed in my turn, 'I must thank you for very great help in what you said this morning,' for in truth, never having yet doubted the existence of God, the teaching of Mr Voysey that He was 'loving unto *every* man, and His tender mercy over *all* his works,' came like a gleam of light across the stormy sea of doubt and distress on which I had so long been tossing. The next Sunday saw me again at the Hall, and Mrs Voysey gave me a cordial invitation to visit them in their Dulwich home. I found their Theism was free from the defects that had revolted me in Christianity, and they opened up to me new views of religion. I read Theodore Parker's *Discourse on Religion*, Francis Newman's works, those of Miss Frances Power Cobbe, and of others; the anguish of the tension relaxed; the nightmare of an Almighty Evil passed away; my belief in God, not yet touched, was cleared from all the dark spots that had sullied it, and I no longer doubted whether the dogmas that had shocked my conscience were true or false. I shook them off, once for all, with all their pain and horror and darkness, and felt, with joy and relief inexpressible, that they were delusions of the ignorance of man, not the revelations of a God."

So far, so good. But could Mrs Besant remain in this position? Obviously not. Whatever beliefs

DOUBT IN THE VICTORIAN ERA

she adopted at this time and later they were always based on some show of reason, and were built on the framework of some sort of logic, however fallacious. Her present phase, however, was clearly devoid of all logic. It was all very well for the Broad Churchman to insist on the humanity of Christ rather than on his divinity; the problem of which to believe still remained, for there can be no true compromise between the two views. So, having given up the chief formal doctrines of Christianity, how could she adhere to the most important and most formal of all? She could not. Nevertheless, she writes, "I shrank from the thought of placing in the crucible a doctrine so dear from all the associations of the past; there was so much that was soothing and ennobling in the idea of a union between Man and God, between a perfect man and a Divine life, between a human heart and an almighty strength. Jesus as God was interwoven with all art and all beauty in religion; to break with the Deity of Jesus was to break with music, with painting, with literature; the Divine Babe in His Mother's arms; the Divine Man in His Passion and His Triumph; the Friend of Man encircled with the majesty of the Godhead. Did inexorable Truth demand that this ideal Figure, with all its pathos, its beauty, its human love, should pass away into the Pantheon of the dead Gods of the Past?"

The difficulty was even graver. For, if she gave up the divinity of Christ, how could she continue to accept Christianity itself? Would this not be the

MRS ANNIE BESANT

sheerest hypocrisy? Yet she was a clergyman's wife, with a duty to her husband and to his flock. Now Mrs Besant began to realize that the path she was following must inevitably lead to a definite breach with her husband. (Or had she perhaps subconsciously realized this long before? And can this realization have been one of the motives now spurring her on?) Yet she did not hasten forward to liberty. Perhaps it was some remnant of Victorian feminine humility, or perhaps it was that stern moral conscientiousness which always characterized her, or perhaps it was true simplicity. Be that as it may, Mrs Besant made one last desperate effort to retain her faith: she went, by invitation, to gather honey from the lips of one of the great theological oracles of that day, Dr Pusey, who had himself fought all his life with unswerving courage for his own particular theological principles. The resulting conversation is worth reproducing, as illustrating better than any lengthy disquisition, the difficulties that beset the earnest doubter in the 70's, and later, of the last century. If this was Pusey, what must the ordinary unenlightened clergyman have been like?

"I found," writes Mrs Besant of her visit to Pusey, "a short, stout gentleman, dressed in a cassock, looking like a comfortable monk; but keen eyes, steadfastly gazing straight into mine, told of the force and subtlety enshrined in the fine, impressive head. But the learned doctor took the wrong line of treatment; he probably saw I was anxious, shy and nervous, and he treated me as a penitent going

DOUBT IN THE VICTORIAN ERA

to confession and seeking the advice of a director, instead of as an inquirer struggling after truth, and resolute to obtain some firm standing-ground in the sea of doubt. He would not deal with the question of the Deity of Jesus as a question for argument. 'You are speaking of your Judge,' he retorted sternly, when I pressed a difficulty. The mere suggestion of an imperfection in the character of Jesus made him shudder, and he checked me with raised hand. 'You are blaspheming. The very thought is a terrible sin.' Would he recommend me any books that might throw light on the subject? 'No, no; you have read too much already. You must pray; you must pray.' When I urged that I could not believe without proof, I was told, 'Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed'; and my further questioning was checked by the murmur, 'O my child, how undisciplined! how impatient!' Truly, he must have found in me—hot, eager, passionate in my determination to *know*, resolute not to profess belief while belief was absent—nothing of the meek, chastened, submissive spirit with which he was wont to deal in penitents seeking his counsel as their spiritual guide. In vain did he bid me pray as though I believed; in vain did he urge the duty of blind submission to the authority of the Church, of blind, unreasoning faith that questioned not. I had not trodden the thorny path of doubt to come to the point from which I had started; I needed, and would have, solid grounds ere I believed. He had no conception of the struggles of a sceptical

MRS ANNIE BESANT

spirit; he had evidently never felt the pangs of doubt; his own faith was solid as a rock, firm, satisfied, unshakable; he would as soon have committed suicide as have doubted of the infallibility of the 'Universal Church.'

" 'It is not your duty to ascertain the truth,' he told me, sternly. 'It is your duty to accept and believe the truth as laid down by the Church. At your peril you reject it. The responsibility is not yours so long as you dutifully accept that which the Church has laid down for your acceptance. Did not the Lord promise that the presence of the Spirit should be ever with His Church, to guide her into all truth?'

" 'But the fact of the promise and its value are just the very points on which I am doubtful,' I answered.

"He shuddered. 'Pray, pray,' he said. 'Father, forgive her, for she knows not what she says.'

"It was in vain that I urged on him the sincerity of my seeking, pointing out that I had everything to gain by following his directions, everything to lose by going my own way, but that it seemed to me untruthful to pretend to accept what was not really believed.

" 'Everything to lose? Yes, indeed. You will be lost for time and lost for eternity.'

" 'Lost or not,' I rejoined, 'I must and will try to find out what is true, and I will not believe till I am sure.'

" 'You have no right to make terms with God,'

DOUBT IN THE VICTORIAN ERA

he retorted. 'As to what you will believe or what you will not believe. You are full of intellectual pride.'

"I sighed hopelessly. Little feeling of pride was there in me just then, but only a despairful feeling that in this rigid, unyielding dogmatism there was no comprehension of my difficulties, no help for me in my strugglings. I rose, and, thanking him for his courtesy, said that I would not waste his time further, that I must go home and face the difficulties, openly leaving the Church and taking the consequences. Then for the first time his serenity was ruffled.

"'I forbid you to speak of your disbelief,' he cried. 'I forbid you to lead into your own lost state the souls for whom Christ died.'

"Slowly and sadly I took my way back to the station, knowing that my last chance of escape had failed me. I recognized in this famous divine the spirit of priestcraft, that could be tender and pitiful to the sinner, repentant, humble, submissive; but that was iron to the doubter, the heretic, and would crush out all questionings of 'revealed truth,' silencing by force, not by argument, all challenge of the traditions of the Church. Out of such men were made the Inquisitors of the Middle Ages, perfectly conscientious, perfectly rigid, perfectly merciless to the heretic. To them heretics are centres of infectious disease, and charity to the heretic is 'the worst cruelty to the souls of men.' "

It would not have been surprising if such an

MRS ANNIE BESANT

encounter had at once precipitated the inevitable climax, even if Mrs Besant had not, that same autumn, met Thomas Scott. This remarkable man, who deserves to hold a more prominent place than he does in the country's annals, had been brought up in France as a Roman Catholic and had even been a page at the court of Charles X. He was a man of means and travelled widely, eventually, at the age of nearly fifty, determining to use his wealth for the propagation of intelligent and sincere religious doubt. He established a sort of freethought salon and published at his own expense over two hundred tracts written by a large number of able thinkers. To this salon Mrs Besant now had the entry and she revelled in the free and open discussion she found there of the vexing problems which had been tormenting her almost in solitude for so long.

PLATE 4



Photo by Dighton's Art Studio

MRS BESANT IN 1869

VII

THE TRIUMPH OF DOUBT

THAT momentous autumn of 1872 could not go on for ever: Mrs Besant had to return to Sibsey, to her husband, to the parsonage, and to the parish. She returned a vastly changed woman. She had fought the demon doubt—and had lost. Now at least she knew where she stood. She was willing to attend such parts of the Church services as were directed to the Deity, but she was determined not to partake of Holy Communion, feeling that to do so would be the merest hypocrisy in one who did not believe in the divinity of Jesus. To this course, one is rather surprised to learn, Mr Besant agreed; perhaps he still hoped to wean his wife from her wandering inclinations. At any rate, on the first Sacrament Sunday after her return to Sibsey, the vicar's wife rose from her seat and left the Church at the critical point in the service. The congregation naturally concluded merely that she had been taken ill, and the crisis was deferred. It was again deferred that winter by the outbreak of an epidemic of typhoid fever in the village. "Naturally fond of nursing," wrote Mrs Besant later with naïve egoism, "I found in this epidemic work just fitted to my hand."

MRS ANNIE BESANT

The care of the sick gave Mrs Besant a little breathing space, of which she took advantage to reduce to writing her conclusions about the chief problem then troubling her. This she did with the help and advice of Voysey and Scott, the former editing for her and the latter publishing a pamphlet by her *On the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth*, "An Enquiry into the Nature of Jesus by an Examination of the Synoptic Gospels. By the wife of a Beneficed Clergyman. Edited and Prefaced by Rev. Charles Voysey." A little later Mrs Besant brought out under the same auspices a continuation of this pamphlet, entitled *According to St John*, "On the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth. Part II. A Comparison between the Four Gospels and the Three Synoptics. By the Wife of a Beneficed Clergyman. Edited and Prefaced by Rev. Charles Voysey."

Anonymity of this kind can seldom be preserved; rumours grew and spread in the village and outside it, and relatives on both sides made representations. The highly anomalous situation became impossible, Mr Besant regarded these publications as the last straws, and at last, in the summer of 1873, he presented his ultimatum; she must *outwardly* (!) conform by attending Communion or be excluded from the house. This was no choice for Mrs Besant, for she had chosen long ago; she left, nor must the courage then required for such a step be underrated. Hundreds of parsons' wives no doubt *outwardly* conformed to things they had no belief in, but to Annie Besant this would have been unworthy

THE TRIUMPH OF DOUBT

of her lofty principles, which already she was taking very seriously indeed.

And so, at the age of under twenty-six, almost destitute, and totally inexperienced in the earning of a livelihood, she faced the world alone. In doing so she braved her family, and particularly her mother, public opinion, worldly wisdom, very nearly everything, in fact, but her conscience. Wholly destitute she was not nor wholly alone. "Facts which I need not touch on here," she wrote later, "enabled my brother to obtain for me a legal separation, and when everything was arranged, I found myself guardian of my little daughter, and possessor of a small monthly income sufficient for respectable starvation." The facts at which Mrs Besant hints were her husband's cruelty to her.

Her brother, willing to help her so far, was unwilling to do more unless she undertook to give up her heretical friends and to keep quiet. But Mrs Besant had not escaped from one prison only to enter another, and she decided to find work of some kind. She spent money in employment agencies, with the usual result of such expenditure. She tried her luck, as a "lady in reduced circumstances," at fancy needlework, and succeeded in earning 4s. 6d. by some weeks of stitching. She was given the opportunity of selling pencil-cases and cruet stands to her friends, which she declined. And finally she went to Folkestone, where the vicar, with Christian charity, offered her board and lodging for herself and little Mabel. In exchange she was not expected

MRS ANNIE BESANT

to do more than be head cook, governess, and nurse, all her spare time being no doubt her own. Here she had ample opportunities for displaying her nursing talents, for one of her charges fell ill with diphtheria, and then another with scarlet fever.

In the meanwhile Mrs Besant had planned to set up house with her mother. They had taken a small house in Colby Road, Upper Norwood, to be near the Scotts, and that spring (of 1874) they were to take possession. Only a week or two before this long-awaited day Mrs Wood fell seriously ill and again her daughter had to turn nurse. All her efforts were unavailing and in May Mrs Wood died. Before her death there occurred one of those dramatic scenes in which Mrs Besant was so often involved. Mrs Wood, as an earnest Churchwoman, was naturally anxious to communicate before she died, but positively refused to do so unless her daughter shared the Communion with her. Two clergymen refused to allow Mrs Besant to communicate, preferring to allow the dying woman to risk her salvation. Finally Mrs Besant put her case to Dean Stanley, who at once consented to celebrate the rite by the bedside of Mrs Wood.

Mrs Besant was profoundly devoted to her mother; it was one of the most genuine emotions of her life. At first she was broken-hearted, but soon the presence of her little daughter, the need for hard work, and her continuing religious pre-occupations, brought consolation. Mr and Mrs Scott were constantly helpful, and she earned a little money by writing a

THE TRIUMPH OF DOUBT

series of pamphlets for Scott over her own name. These tracts had such titles as *Natural Religion* versus *Revealed Religion*, *On Eternal Torture*, *On Inspiration*, *On the Atonement*, *On the Religious Education of Children*. In 1879, after Scott's death, Mrs Besant wrote: "It was Thomas Scott whose house was open to me when my need was sorest, and he never knew, this generous, noble heart, how sometimes, when I went in, weary and overdone, from a long day's study in the British Museum, with scarce food to struggle through the day—he never knew how his genial, 'Well, little lady,' in welcoming tone, cheered the then utter loneliness of my life. To no living man—save one—do I owe the debt of gratitude that I owe to Thomas Scott."

At this stage Annie Besant still called herself a Theist. Her pamphlets were straightforward and methodical but uninspired presentations of the logical case against item after item in the Christian dogma. She was always careful to explain, however, that she was not attacking the notion of Deity, and that she was merely arguing against certain Christian doctrines, and eventually against Christianity itself. All this was now to be changed. "To no living man—save one," she had written; she was now to meet that one, Charles Bradlaugh. The transition, however, was not sudden. Mrs Besant had been getting more and more restless, more and more dissatisfied. There are various signs of this. All the pamphlets mentioned above (except that *On Inspiration*) published by Scott in 1874, bear the name first of "Mrs

MRS ANNIE BESANT

A. Besant," then of "Annie Besant," and finally of "A. Besant." In 1875, as the views expressed became more extreme, the author's name vanished from the title-page of Mrs Besant's tracts. This was the case with *Euthanasia*, in which Mrs Besant argues for the painless killing of persons suffering from hopeless and painful diseases. Similarly, a rather bitter pamphlet, *On Prayer*, appeared anonymously, as did one *On the Mediation and Salvation of Ecclesiastical Christianity*.

There was now clearly only one final problem for the daring young woman to attack. "Gradually I recognized the limitations of human intelligence and its incapacity for understanding the nature of God, presented as infinite and absolute; I had given up the use of prayer as a blasphemous absurdity, since an all-wise God could not need my suggestions, nor an all-good God require my promptings. But God fades out of the daily life of those who never pray; a personal God who is not a Providence is a superfluity; when from the heaven does not smile a listening Father, it soon becomes an empty space, whence resounds no echo of man's cry. I could then reach no loftier conception of the Divine than that offered by the orthodox, and that broke hopelessly away as I analysed it." Mr Scott consented to the writing of a tract on this subject, and in due course the manuscript, considerably beyond the average length of Mrs Besant's pamphlets, was ready under the title, *On the Nature and Existence of God*.

It was at this moment that she made the acquaint-

THE TRIUMPH OF DOUBT

tance of Charles Bradlaugh. One day Mrs Moncure Conway asked her whether she had ever been to the Hall of Science. "No," replied Mrs Besant, "I have never been there. Mr Bradlaugh is rather a rough sort of speaker, is he not?" Mrs Conway replied that he was, on the contrary, the finest speaker of Saxon English she had ever heard. Mrs Besant accordingly bought an issue of Bradlaugh's paper, *The National Reformer*, was impressed by it, and wrote to the editor to ask whether it was necessary to profess Atheism to belong to the National Secular Society, of which it was the organ. In the columns of *The National Reformer* Bradlaugh made one of his subtle and sensible replies: "To be a member of the National Secular Society it is only necessary to be able honestly to accept the four principles, as given in the *National Reformer* of June 14th. This any person may do without being required to avow himself an Atheist. Candidly, we can see no logical resting-place between the entire acceptance of authority, as in the Roman Catholic Church, and the most extreme Rationalism. If, on again looking to the Principles of the Society, you can accept them we repeat to you our invitation." In *The National Reformer* for 9 August 1874 Mrs Besant's name duly appears as a new member; a week earlier she had gone to the Hall of Science to receive her certificate from the hands of Bradlaugh himself, and then set foot for the first time in a Freethought hall.

VIII

CHARLES BRADLAUGH

BORN on 26 September 1833, the son of a solicitor's clerk who brought up a family of five children on two pounds a week, Charles Bradlaugh had a childhood and youth very different from those of Mrs Besant. At the age of twelve he was an errand-boy, at fourteen a clerk at eleven shillings a week, at fifteen a Sunday school teacher. Although he had left school at twelve he had since read everything he could lay his hands on. As a teacher in a Sunday school he naturally took theology in his stride, and having a bent for criticism and analysis, he seemed to perceive some difficulties and contradictions in Christianity. The clergyman to whom he took his difficulties at once stigmatized him as an atheist, and (another Mr Besant!) confronted the lad with the alternative of recantation or dismissal from his job. The young Charles unhesitatingly left his job and his home, and tried to set up as a coal merchant; heading for success, the baker's wife, one of his best customers, one day smelled the brimstone, and ruined him. Unabashed Bradlaugh, having had fair warning of what was before him, continued to pursue his inquiries, making the scantiest sort of living, but reading and studying all the time, learning Hebrew

CHARLES BRADLAUGH

with one friend, French with another, and Greek, Latin and Arabic at odd moments!

But he had to live and he hated debt (he who was afterwards to be forced by his opponents into permanent debt) and finally, in despair, at the age of seventeen, Bradlaugh joined the army, becoming a private in the 7th (Princess Royal's) Dragoon Guards, stationed in Ireland. On his way over he gained the affection of his fellow-recruits by standing up for their rights. In 1853 a tiny legacy enabled his discharge from the army to be paid for (conduct "extremely good"). He became a solicitor's errand-boy at ten shillings a week, raised very soon to fifteen. Within a few years the ex-soldier was practically running his employer's business, at the munificent salary of £65 a year.

At the same time Bradlaugh actively continued his career as a freethought advocate, both by lecturing and by writing. To this work he devoted so much of his time and energy that he never succeeded in attaining an independence in business, so that eventually he devoted himself exclusively to propaganda. He became editor of *The Investigator*, President of the London Secular Society, and in 1860 editor of *The National Reformer*. He had married, and, a teetotaller, had the misfortune to see his home wrecked by his wife's dipsomania. This fact was used against him, then and after, by his opponents, who hesitated to use no weapons to ruin him. Thus, he was on one occasion prevented from collecting a debt owing to him, by the plea that he

MRS ANNIE BESANT

was an atheist, could not take the oath, and that his evidence thus was not admissible.

At the same time Bradlaugh began his political career. Freethought at that time was associated, for quite accidental historical reasons, with republicanism, and Bradlaugh accepted the latter with the former, though in this field his actions were not always consistent or admirable. In 1858 he helped to defend Truelove for his support of the attempted murder of Napoleon III. He was a member of the Parliamentary Reform League, and it was his action which led to the pulling down of the railings in Hyde Park in 1866. In the following year he drew up the first draft of the Fenian proclamation, and in 1870 he took part in the Spanish and French revolutionary movements. Before this, in 1868, Bradlaugh had attempted to enter the House by standing for Northampton. All the forces of respectability were marshalled against him and he was defeated.

In the same year he prosecuted one of his many contests on behalf of the freedom of the Press, by refusing to give securities against the possibility of blasphemy being published in *The National Reformer*. In 1873 Bradlaugh returned from America to contest Northampton for the second time, and was for the second time defeated; but whereas the margin had been over a thousand on the first occasion, the deficit had now been reduced to 143 votes. The death of one of the members led to a renewed contest in 1874, in which Bradlaugh was once more defeated.

CHARLES BRADLAUGH

It was at this stage in his career that he met Mrs Besant, but it will be convenient here to continue this rapid sketch of his career to its end. Powerfully helped by his new ally Bradlaugh continued his work for freedom of thought, taking the birth-control case of 1877-8 in his stride, as only one fight out of many. In 1880 he again stood for Northampton, and this time was returned. On presenting himself at the House, he refused to take the oath, insisting on his right to affirm instead. In this way he began a fight in the House of Commons which continued unabated for six years. Time and again re-elected for Northampton, time and again he was refused leave to take his seat, being even ejected with physical violence. Finally he triumphed, took his seat, retained it for the rest of his life, and gained the respect and affection of the whole House. In 1891, at the age of fifty-eight, he died, worn out by his unceasing efforts on behalf of freedom of thought, freedom of speech, and the freedom of the Press. It is difficult to imagine any verdict of history other than that he was one of the truly great men of the nineteenth century. He was remarkable for his absolute sincerity and for his simple-minded devotion to the cause to which he had devoted himself. The chief secret of his great success was the union in him of a rare clearness of intellect and absence of all pose, with oratorical gifts which are said to have been exceptional even in that age of great orators.

IX

ATHEISM

SUCH was the man who spoke that evening with a passionate sincerity and power of speech which must have made a strong appeal to Mrs Besant: for these were qualities which answered to similar ones in herself. At the end of the lecture he distributed their certificates to the new members, and suggested that Mrs Besant should come and see him to discuss her difficulties. Even after she had broken with Bradlaugh, or rather he with her, and had become a Theosophist, than which no step more abhorrent to Bradlaugh could be imagined, Mrs Besant had the generosity and good feeling to write this of Bradlaugh: "From that first meeting in the Hall of Science dated a friendship that lasted unbroken till Death severed the earthly bond, and that to me stretches through Death's gateway and links us together still. As friends, not as strangers, we met—swift recognition, as it were, leaping from eye to eye; and I know now that the instinctive friendliness was in very truth an outgrowth of strong friendship in other lives, and that on that August day we took up again an ancient tie, we did not begin a new one. And so in lives to come we shall meet again, and help each other as we helped each other in this.

ATHEISM

“And let me here place on record, as I have done before, some word of what I owe him for his true friendship; though, indeed, how great is my debt to him I can never tell. Some of his wise phrases have ever remained in my memory. ‘You should never say you have an opinion on a subject until you have tried to study the strongest things said against the view to which you are inclined.’ ‘You must not think you know a subject until you are acquainted with all that the best minds have said about it.’ ‘No steady work can be done in public unless the worker study at home far more than he talks outside.’ ‘Be your own harshest judge, listen to your own speech and criticize it; read abuse of yourself and see what grains of truth are in it.’ ‘Do not waste time by reading opinions that are mere echoes of your own; read opinions you disagree with, and you will catch aspects of truth you do not readily see.’

“Through our long comradeship he was my sternest as well as gentlest critic, pointing out to me that in a party like ours, where our own education and knowledge were above those whom we led, it was very easy to gain indiscriminate praise and unstinted admiration; on the other hand, we received from Christians equally indiscriminate abuse and hatred. It was, therefore, needful that we should be our own harshest judges, and that we should be sure that we knew thoroughly every subject that we taught. He saved me from the superficiality that my ‘fatal facility’ of speech might so easily have induced;

MRS ANNIE BESANT

and when I began to taste the intoxication of easily won applause, his criticism of weak points, his challenge of weak arguments, his trained judgement, were of priceless service to me, and what of value there is in my work is very largely due to his influence, which at once stimulated and restrained."

A day or two later Mrs Besant went to see Bradlaugh, the MS. of her tract *On the Nature and Existence of God* in her hand. Bradlaugh pointed out that she had unwittingly thought herself into Atheism. Mrs Besant acknowledged the fact, and made only one alteration to her text: she corrected a passage in which she had said that Atheism asserts that there is no God. From this moment Mrs Besant adhered to her hard-won conviction until, fourteen years later, she made a still more radical departure by becoming a Theosophist. No attempt has been made to enter in any detail into Annie Besant's gradually developing views, through Deism and Theism into Freethought and Atheism. Her views were all this time far too immature and fluctuating to allow of analysis. But now she had attained a (temporarily) sure haven, and it is therefore necessary to show in some measure exactly what it was that she believed at this time.

In 1877 Mrs Besant published her *The Gospel of Atheism*, in which she attempted to define her attitude. She begins by making it clear that the Atheist does not assert that there is no God, but that he merely declares that he has no conception of the meaning of God. "The Atheist neither

ATHEISM

affirms nor denies the possibility of phenomena differing from those cognized by human experience. He affirms that, life being the resultant of conditions, varieties of life will arise from varieties of conditions." In fact, the Atheist refuses to believe anything about that of which he knows nothing; he neither denies nor affirms. But he does deny that which he knows to be untrue. Thus, in Mrs Besant's example, he will affirm that three times one are three, and he will deny that three times one are one. So far, so good. The point just made is perhaps not quite so sound philosophically as Mrs Besant thought; still, if we accept it, what then?

It must be owned that no further definite ideas can be derived from Mrs Besant's *Gospel*. It contains such outbursts of eloquence as: "Atheist is one of the grandest titles a man can wear; it is the Order of Merit of the world's heroes. Most great discoverers, most deep-thinking philosophers, most earnest reformers, most toiling pioneers of progress, have in their turn had flung at them the name of Atheist. It was howled over the grave of Copernicus; it was clamoured round the death-pile of Bruno; it was yelled at Vanini, at Spinoza, at Priestley, at Voltaire, at Paine; it has become the laurel-bay of the hero, the halo of the martyr; in the world's history it has meant the pioneer of progress, and where the cry of 'Atheist' is raised there may we be sure that another step is being taken towards the redemption of humanity. The saviours of the world are too often howled at as Atheists, and then wor-

MRS ANNIE BESANT

shipped as Deities. The Atheists are the vanguard of the army of Freethought, on whom falls the brunt of the battle, and are shivered the hardest of the blows; their feet trample down the thorns that others may tread unwounded; their bodies fill up the ditch that, by the bridge thus made, others may pass to victory. Honour to the pioneers of progress, honour to the vanguard of Liberty's army, honour to those who to improve earth have forgotten heaven, and who in their zeal for man have forgotten God." But beyond that there is nothing.

Elsewhere, however, Mrs Besant made a more reasoned attempt to justify Atheism as a positive creed. She set out from a species of monism, regarding it as manifest to all "who will take the trouble to think steadily," that matter and spirit are only varying manifestations of one eternal and underived substance. From this rather dangerous position Mrs Besant argued that the Deity must necessarily be that eternal and underived substance. "Thus," she continues, "we identify substance with the all-comprehending and vivifying force of nature." This is a little difficult to follow. If we are prepared, as was Mrs Besant, to take up an extreme monistic attitude by a mere assertion, without argument, this procedure could conceivably be allowed for the sake of the argument. Having taken up this position it by no means follows as a necessity that the basic substance must be the Deity. Granting even this, however, how can we maintain that we have "thus" identified substance both with God and with nature?

ATHEISM

The argument obviously has not even the semblance of reason. We can see, however, that the triple assumption was essential to Mrs Besant's case, for she proceeds to point out, having made it, that "we simply reduce to a physical impossibility the existence of the Being described by the orthodox as a God possessing the attributes of personality."

Having thus dismissed the notion of a personal God, justly enough, perhaps, however little one may agree with the course of the argument, Mrs Besant inquired whether *any* idea of God could be attained. She concluded, or rather, asserted, that evidence was lacking, that we could grasp only phenomena, implying presumably (quite unjustifiably) that phenomena are incapable of yielding any evidence of God. In short, she said, "I do not believe in God. My mind finds no grounds on which to build up a reasonable faith. My heart revolts against the spectre of an Almighty Indifference to the pain of sentient beings. My conscience rebels against the injustice, the cruelty, the inequality, which surround me on every side. But I believe in Man. In Man's redeeming power; in Man's remoulding energy; in Man's approaching triumph, through knowledge, love and work."

Mrs Besant's approach to the problems of the soul, and of life and death, was similar. She posited "An Existence at present inscrutable by human faculties, of which all phenomena are modes," and which "manifests as Force-Matter." (We shall see, by the way, that she gave this doctrine a very

different implication in Theosophy, though retaining the words). Life she regarded as a property, not as an entity. "Life is the result of an arrangement of matter, and when rearrangement occurs the former result can no longer be present; we call the result of the changed arrangement death. Life and death are two convenient words for expressing the general outcome of the two arrangements of matter, one of which is always found to precede the other."

"Everyone knows," she continued, in a passage which is quoted not only for its relevance to the immediate discussion, but also as providing a typical example of Mrs Besant's more deliberate oratorical effects, "Everyone knows the exquisite iridiscence of mother-of-pearl, glowing with soft radiance. How different is the dull, dead surface of a piece of wax. Yet take that dull, black wax and mould it so closely to the surface of the mother-of-pearl that it shall take every delicate marking of the shell, and when you raise it the seven-hued glory shall smile at you from the erstwhile colourless surface. For, though it be to the naked eye imperceptible, all the surface of the mother-of-pearl is in delicate ridges and furrows, like the surface of a newly ploughed field; and when the waves of light come dashing up against the ridged surface, they are broken like the waves on a shingly shore, and are flung backwards, so that they cross each other and the oncoming waves; and, as every ray of light is made up of waves of seven colours, and these waves differ in length each

ATHEISM

from the others, the fairy ridges fling them backward separately, and each ray reaches the eye by itself so that the colour of the mother-of-pearl is really the spray of light waves, and comes from arrangement of matter once again. Give the dull, black wax the same ridges and furrows, and its glory shall differ in nothing from that of the shell. To apply our illustration: as the colour belongs to one arrangement of matter and the dead surface to another, so life belongs to some arrangements of matter and is their resultant, while the resultant of other arrangements is death."

Here we find what we shall find again and again in Mrs Besant's intellectual life. Possessing to a high degree the faculty of vivid and lucid exposition, she often mistook the *exposition* of a problem for its *explanation*. In the passage quoted Mrs Besant undoubtedly gives us, in telling phrases and in a really brilliant simile, a picture of the difference between life and death, but it is merely a picture that tells a story, without in the least elucidating it.

When she turned to the "spirit in man" Mrs Besant at least offers us something in the shape of solid argument. She suggested that the "spirit" was wholly dependent on the body. "When the babe is born it shows no sign of mind. For a brief space hunger and repletion, cold and warmth are its only sensations. Slowly the specialized senses begin to function; still more slowly muscular movements, at first aimless and reflex, become co-ordinated and consciously directed. There is no sign here of

an intelligent spirit controlling a mechanism; there is every sign of a learning and developing intelligence, developing *pari passu* with the organism of which it is a function. As the body grows, the mind grows with it, and the childish mind of the child develops into the hasty, quickly judging, half-informed, unbalanced youthful mind of the youth; with maturity of years comes maturity of mind, and body and mind are vigorous and in their prime. As old age comes on and the bodily functions decay, the mind decays also, until age passes into senility, and body and mind sink into second childhood. Has the immortal spirit decayed with the organization, or is it dwelling in sorrow, bound in its 'house of clay'? If this be so, the 'spirit' must be unconscious, or else separate from the very individual whose essence it is supposed to be, for the old man does not suffer when his mind is senile, but is contented as a little child.

"And not only is this constant, simultaneous growth and decay of body and mind to be observed, but we know that mental functions are disordered and suspended by various physical conditions. Alcohol, many drugs, fever, disorder of the mind, a blow on the cranium suspends its functions, and the 'spirit' returns with the surgeon's trepanning. Does the 'spirit' take part in dreams? Is it absent from the idiot, from the lunatic? Is it guilty of manslaughter when the madman murders, or does it helplessly watch its own instrument performing actions at which it shudders? If it can only work

ATHEISM

here through an organism, is its nature changed in its independent life, severed from all with which it was identified? Can it, in its 'disembodied state,' have anything in common with its past?"

Here it is enough to say that though the facts were true *at the time* (modern knowledge goes further), the reasoning cannot be accepted. The fact (if it is a fact, which the evidence for telepathy makes rather doubtful) that mind can manifest only through matter is no argument against mind in itself. One might as well deny the existence of stars because they manifest only at night; does the fact that when you remove the conditions of night-time you abolish the stellar manifestations prove that Sirius is a by-product of darkness? It is impossible to grant Mrs Besant's claim that her "unbelief in the existence of the Soul or Spirit was a matter of cold, calm reasoning."

It is when she turned to the practical implications of Atheism that we see the Mrs Besant of the 'seventies and 'eighties at her best. In ethics, after all, the practical side vastly overbalances the philosophical; indeed, it is probably true to say that ethics is not at all a normative science. In other words, in a public person, we need not worry about the roads by which he has reached his convictions, so long as the latter are good.¹ Thus, though one may feel convinced that Mrs Besant's utilitarianism was philosophically false, it cannot be denied that in going up and down the country delivering lectures

¹ But what is "good"? the philosopher will justly ask!

MRS ANNIE BESANT

in which occurred such passages as the following she was doing much good: "Amid the fervid movement of society, with its wild theories and crude social reforms, with its righteous fury against oppression and its unconsidered notions of wider freedom and gladder life, it is of vital importance that morality should stand on a foundation unshakable; that so through all political and religious revolutions human life may grow purer and nobler, may rise upwards into settled freedom, and not sink downwards into anarchy. Only utility can afford us a sure basis, the reasonableness of which will be accepted alike by thoughtful student and hard-headed artisan. Utility appeals to all alike, and sets in action motives which are found equally in every human heart. Well shall it be for humanity that creeds and dogmas pass away, that superstition vanishes, and the clear light of freedom and science dawns on a regenerated earth—but well only if men draw tighter and closer the links of trustworthiness, of honour, and of truth. Equality before the law is necessary and just; liberty is the birthright of every man and woman; free individual development will elevate and glorify the race. But little worth these priceless jewels, little worth liberty and equality with all their promise for mankind, little worth even wider happiness, if that happiness be selfish, if true fraternity, true brotherhood, do not knit man to man, and heart to heart, in loyal service to the common need, and generous self-sacrifice to the common good."

Such was Mrs Besant's Atheism. That it was the

ATHEISM

product of a schooled and penetrating intellect cannot justly be maintained. It clearly springs from a restless and insufficiently instructed mind, from warm and benevolent feelings, and from a wholly sincere urge for well-doing.

X

THE ORATOR

MRS BESANT'S decision to join forces with Bradlaugh was soon made. In September of that same year she helped him in his renewed fight for Northampton, and by the following January she had made up her mind to devote herself wholly to propagandist work for the cause of Freethought and all that went with it. "I counted the cost ere I determined on this step, for I knew that it would not only outrage the feelings of such new friends as I had already made, but would be likely to imperil my custody of my little girl. I knew that an Atheist was outside the law, obnoxious to its penalties, but deprived of its protection, and that the step I contemplated might carry me into conflicts in which everything might be lost and nothing could be gained. But the desire to spread liberty and truer thought among men, to war against bigotry and superstition, to make the world freer and better than I found it—all this impelled me with a force that would not be denied. I seemed to hear the voice of Truth ringing over the battlefield: 'Who will go? Who will speak for me?' And I sprang forward with passionate enthusiasm, with resolute cry: 'Here am I, send me!' Nor have I ever regretted for one hour that

THE ORATOR

resolution, come to in solitude, carried out amid the surging life of men, to devote to that sacred cause every power of brain and tongue that I possessed. Very solemn to me is the responsibility of the public teacher, standing forth in Press and on platform to partly mould the thought of his time, swaying thousands of readers and hearers year after year. No weightier responsibility can any take, no more sacred charge. The written and the spoken word start forces none may measure, set working brain after brain, influence numbers unknown to the forthgiver of the word, work for good or for evil all down the stream of time. Feeling the greatness of the career, the solemnity of the duty, I pledged my word then to the cause I loved that no effort on my part should be wanting to render myself worthy of the privilege of service that I took; that I would read and study, and would train every faculty that I had; that I would polish my language, discipline my thought, widen my knowledge; and this, at least, I may say, that if I have written and spoken much, I have studied and thought more, and that I have not given to my mistress Truth that 'which hath cost me nothing.'"

Mrs Besant was instantly successful in her chosen field. In the very first year of her new life she became a vice-president of the National Secular Society, the body of which Bradlaugh was President. In 1878 she became joint-editor with Bradlaugh of *The National Secular Society's Almanack* and in 1881 similarly of *The National Reformer*. But her

MRS ANNIE BESANT

chief weapon was no longer the pen: she had discovered that the gift of speech was hers, as she had suspected a few years before in her husband's church at Sibsey. In the spring of 1873, alone in the church, the parson's wife thought she would like to know how it felt to deliver a sermon, "So locked alone in the great, silent church, whither I had gone to practise some organ exercises, I ascended the pulpit steps and delivered my first lecture on the Inspiration of the Bible. I shall never forget the feeling of power and delight—but especially of power—that came upon me as I sent my voice ringing down the aisles, and the passion in me broke into balanced sentences and never paused for musical cadence or for rhythmical expression. All I wanted then was to see the church full of upturned faces, alive with throbbing sympathy, instead of the dreary emptiness of silent pews. And as though in a dream the solitude was peopled, and I saw the listening faces and the eager eyes, and as the sentences flowed unbidden from my lips and my own tones echoed back to me from the pillars of the ancient church, I knew of a verity that the gift of speech was mine, and that if ever—and then it seemed so impossible!—if ever the chance came to me of public work, this power of melodious utterance should at least win hearing for any message I had to bring."

Now Mrs Besant realized that her great gift was to have its use. The propaganda of the National Secular Society was naturally directed mainly at the uneducated classes. Here and there groups of

THE ORATOR

skilled artisans, rapidly becoming conscious of their inferior situation, were educating themselves and were capable of reading and understanding arguments in the form of the printed word. In the main, however, the work had to be carried on by word of mouth. Thus it was that Bradlaugh the orator was not slow in welcoming to his side a woman who, in her way, was as powerful a speaker as himself. In 1874 Mrs Besant gave her first public lecture, on "The Political Status of Women," though, as this was a written paper, it can hardly be classed as a speech. The usual nervousness vanished as she rose to her feet and again she emphasized the fact that her chief feeling was one of power, a feeling dangerous to all but the strongest heads. How many a popular preacher and demagogue has not been undone by this same feeling of power, this same ability to sway an audience? Was Mrs Besant to share this fate, as well as that attendant on the "fatal facility" against which Bradlaugh warned her?

In February 1875 began Mrs Besant's lecturing career properly speaking, and thereafter one may read in the columns of *The National Reformer* month after month details of her incessant journeys to all parts of the country, bringing the message of Freethought to all sorts and conditions of people. Her first tour took her to Birkenhead, Glasgow, and Aberdeen, and in the itinerary of this journey can be marked the callous treatment nearly always meted out to lecturers, who are expected to have bodies of steel, as well as brazen throats and golden tongues. The

MRS ANNIE BESANT

lecturer, after speaking at Birkenhead in the evening, was expected to proceed the same night to Glasgow, and to speak there on the day of arrival!

Later in the same month Mrs Besant spoke for the first time in the Hall of Science itself, the scene of so many of her future triumphs, and then the centre of Freethought activity in London. Into the subsequent years of lecturing it is not necessary to enter in any detail. On one occasion she gave twelve lectures in eight days in Northumberland and Durham, finding herself eleven shillings out of pocket at the end. On another occasion she had to drive ten miles over rough roads in a butcher's cart to the scene of her lecture. In Lancashire she experienced stone-throwing. Elsewhere no local personage had the courage to take the chair for her. On yet another occasion she was mobbed, vilified, and in short went through all the experiences which were then the lot of anyone who had the courage to put forward views contrary to those of the unthinking majority. But these experiences were, after all, exceptional. Nearly always any opposition that may have existed to begin with was charmed away as soon as Mrs Besant began to speak. Within a few minutes she had her audience in her hand, and the conclusion was more often than not a scene of triumph.

The tribute of those who heard Mrs Besant in the 'seventies, 'eighties, and 'nineties, leaves no room for doubt that she was in fact the first woman orator of her time. Tom Mann has said that "Mrs Besant

THE ORATOR

transfixed me; her superb control of voice, her whole-souled devotion to the cause she was advocating, her love of the downtrodden, and her appeal on behalf of a sound education for all children, created such an impression upon me that I quietly, but firmly, resolved that I would ascertain more correctly the why and wherefore of her creed."

A prominent positivist, Malcolm Quin, wrote that, looking back, "she still seems incomparably young and attractive, her face alive with emotion and expression, her voice full and sonorous, but musical and not unfeminine. She was perhaps too uniformly earnest and indignant in her denunciation of bigotry and obscurantism, rarely indulging in wit. She was, or we thought she was, a martyr; she had won freedom from domestic and clerical oppression at the cost of social proscription. She faced a hostile world on behalf of liberty and truth. We young men, who had the passion of these things in our souls, responded readily to the passion with which she pleaded for them. We were carried away. Mrs Besant's portrait was for sale at the close of the lecture and I still have the copy which I bought at the time. Its colours are now faded, but the image of this young prophetess of religious and political progress as she appeared on her first lecturing tour is still fresh in my mind."¹

What was the secret of Mrs Besant's oratorical success? The passage quoted on p. 66 above may

¹ I owe this quotation to Gertrude M Williams's admirable biography, *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1931)

MRS ANNIE BESANT

be re-read, and the following passage considered at the same time: "Have you ever been drawn away for a moment into higher, more peaceful realms, when you have come across something of beauty, of art, of the wonders of science, of the grandeur of philosophy? Have you for a time lost sight of the pettiness of earth, of trivial troubles, of small worries and annoyances, and felt yourself lifted into a calmer region, into a light that is not the light of common earth? Have you ever stood before some wondrous picture wherein the palette of the painter has been taxed to light the canvas with all the hues of beauteous colour that art can give to human sight? Or have you seen in some wondrous sculpture, the gracious living curves that the chisel has freed from the roughness of the marble? Or have you listened while the diviner spell of music has lifted you, step by step, till you seem to hear the Gandharvas singing and almost the divine flute is being played and echoing in the lower world? Or have you stood on the mountain peak with the snows around you, and felt the grandeur of the unmoving nature that shows out God as well as the human spirit? Ah, if you have known any of these peaceful spots in life's desert, then you know how all-pervading is inspiration; how wondrous the beauty and the power of God shown forth in man and in the world."¹

If the reader will consider these passages, together with those scattered throughout the present volume, there is one thing which will immediately become

¹ This passage dates from 1899.

THE ORATOR

apparent to him. It is that Mrs Besant's style is largely undistinguished by felicity of language or structure. Take the 1899 quotation. Almost every phrase is commonplace. "wonders of science," "grandeur of philosophy," "lines of beautiful colour," "gracious living curves," and so on. There is practically no use of the subtler rhetorical tricks of the classical orators. What has to be said is said in a simple, quiet manner, with the first words that come to the lips, and with an almost total lack of artful devices. Yet the passage as a whole is undoubtedly effective, and nobody who has heard Annie Besant speak, even if only in old age (like the present writer), can forget the cumulative effect of a number of such passages, joined together by a level conversational narrative still quieter, still more unstudied.

What then is the secret? It is I think this. Mrs Besant had the greatest of all oratorical gifts, the ability to project herself into her audience, mentally to incorporate herself with it, so that the audience almost feels that *it* is speaking rather than some outside entity. Then Mrs Besant was in her prime a very handsome woman, and later a noble, dignified and picturesque one. She always spoke with the utmost self-confidence and with the utmost sincerity. She had a small but singularly bell-like and modulated voice. Her use of similes and metaphors was severely restricted but always effective, her vocabulary simple and homely. All in all, it is small wonder that Mr Shaw, writing in 1924, said that at this time "Annie

MRS ANNIE BESANT

Besant was the greatest orator in England, perhaps the greatest in Europe. Whether it is possible for her to be still that at seventy-seven I do not know; but I have never heard her excelled; and she was then unapproached."

XI

BIRTH-CONTROL

QUITE early in Mrs Besant's career as a Freethought propagandist there occurred an event which compelled her to make up her mind on a question of such great social importance and delicacy that it amounted to a final parting of the ways. She took the right decision, and this undoubtedly helped to hold her to her Freethought convictions, as well as gaining for herself the admiration and affection of thousands of people throughout the country, and indeed throughout the civilized world. This decisive episode may eventually prove to be Mrs Besant's best claim to lasting fame; it has considerable historical and legal importance; and it provides a vivid picture of the state of English society in the middle 'seventies. Thus it is only right that it should be described in some detail.

An American medical man, Dr Charles Knowlton, a supporter of the views of Malthus, had written some forty years before a pamphlet advocating the voluntary limitation of the family, that is, birth-control. This pamphlet is a perfectly sensible and decent piece of work, it had been praised by competent people, had been freely sold since its publication, and bears the tolerably harmless title, *Fruits of*

MRS ANNIE BESANT

Philosophy. Then a Bristol bookseller took it into his head to grangerize some copies of it with improper pictures, and was prosecuted and convicted. Not content with this the police hunted round for copies of the pamphlet in its original state. It so happened that Charles Watts, the publisher of most of the sensible Freethought literature of that day, including *The National Reformer* and the publications of Bradlaugh and Mrs Besant, had a stock of *Fruits of Philosophy*. He was prosecuted and was so ill-advised as to plead guilty.

Bradlaugh and Mrs Besant at once took action. They removed their publishing from Watts's hands, and decided, as a test case, to republish Knowlton's pamphlet. With great energy and organizing skill they took a shop, formed the Freethought Publishing Company, printed the pamphlet, sent notice of their intentions to the police, and at first sold the pamphlet only with their own hands, so that any action that might be taken should not be deflected to others. In a Preface added to their edition of the pamphlet the two colleagues make the very proper comment: "We republished this pamphlet, honestly believing that on all questions affecting the happiness of the people, whether they be theological, political, or social, fullest right of free discussion ought to be maintained at all hazards. We do not personally endorse all that Dr Knowlton says: His 'Philosophical Proem' seems to us full of philosophical mistakes, and—as we are neither of us doctors—we are not prepared to endorse his medical views; but

BIRTH-CONTROL

since progress can only be made through discussion, and no discussion is possible where differing opinions are suppressed, we claim the right to publish all opinions, so that the public, enabled to see all sides of a question, may have the materials for forming a sound judgement."

The partners fully realized what their action involved. "We were not blind to the danger to which this defiance of the authorities exposed us, but it was not the danger of failure, with the prison as penalty, that gave us pause. It was the horrible misconceptions that we saw might arise; the odious imputations on honour and purity that would follow. Could we, the teachers of a lofty morality, venture to face a prosecution for publishing what would be technically described as an obscene book, and risk the ruin of our future, dependent as that was on our fair fame? To Mr Bradlaugh it meant, as he felt, the almost certain destruction of his Parliamentary position, the forging by his own hands of a weapon that in the hands of his foes would be well-nigh fatal. To me it meant the loss of the pure reputation I prized, the good name I had guarded—scandal the most terrible a woman could face. But I had seen the misery of the poor, of my sister-women with children crying for bread; the wages of the workmen were often sufficient for four, but eight or ten they could not maintain. Should I set my own safety, my own good name, against the helping of these? Did it matter that my reputation should be ruined, if its ruin helped to bring remedy to this

MRS ANNIE BESANT

otherwise hopeless wretchedness of thousands? What was worth all my talk about self-sacrifice and self-surrender, if, brought to the test, I failed?"

Before the pamphlet was put on public sale Bradlaugh and Mrs Besant in person delivered copies to the Chief Clerk of the London Magistrates, to the City Police, and to the Solicitor for the City of London, in which their shop was situated. The authorities were informed, in effect, that a prosecution was invited. Urged on by the Christian Evidence Society, the police were not slow to act, warrants were issued, and on 6 April 1877 the partners were arrested, taken to the Bridewell police-court, and on to the Guildhall, where they were released on their own recognizances until 17 April. Committal for trial at the Central Criminal Court followed, but Bradlaugh, from bitter experience up to every trick of the legal process, moved for a writ to have the trial removed to the Court of Queen's Bench. Lord Chief Justice Cockburn and Mr Justice Mellor, having read the pamphlet, the writ was granted.

On 18 June the trial started before the Lord Chief Justice and a special Jury (of whom Mr Walter, of *The Times*, was one), the Tory Solicitor-General, Sir Hardinge Giffard, leading against the partners, who conducted their own defence. The indictment modestly charged that the defendants "unlawfully and wickedly devising, contriving, and intending, as much as in them lay, to vitiate and corrupt the morals as well of youth as of divers other

BIRTH-CONTROL

liege subjects of our said lady the Queen, and to incite and encourage the said liege subjects to indecent, obscene, unnatural, and immoral practices, and bring them to a state of wickedness, lewdness and debauchery, therefore, to wit, on the 24th day of March, A D 1877, in the City of London and within the jurisdiction of the Central Criminal Court, unlawfully, wickedly, knowingly, wilfully, and designedly did print, publish, sell, and utter a certain indecent, lewd, filthy, and obscene libel, to wit, a certain indecent, lewd, filthy, bawdy, and obscene book, called 'Fruits of Philosophy,' thereby contaminating, vitiating, and corrupting the morals "

The Solicitor-General addressed the jury with vigour and even venom, reading passages from Knowlton "with extreme pain and regret," and then proceeding to use language, entirely original to himself, of such extreme coarseness that in the verbatim report it had to be paraphrased "Don't talk to me about doctors!" he cried, "I care not if every physician in England had written a book of this character " Giffard's attitude was such that he had constantly to be interrupted and reproved by the Judge, who behaved throughout in a scrupulously just manner

Evidence to prove the sale of the copies was then called, and here a curious fact emerged. In cross-examination Mr Bradlaugh was quite unable to elicit the name of the prosecuting party After these preliminaries Mrs Besant made her speech for the defence *The Times*, which published a full and

MRS ANNIE BESANT

tolerably fair report of the trial (very different from its editorial comments), observed that Mrs Besant defended herself "with remarkable ability, and with such earnestness and evident sincerity as ultimately induced the jury to exonerate them [the defendants] from any corrupt motive in the publication."

Mrs Besant made a highly effective opening: "My Lord, and gentlemen of the jury—it will not seem strange to any of you if, in defending myself here to-day, I find myself slightly over-weighted by the amount of legal ability which the prosecution has thought it well to bring against me. I know that names such as those who stand as advocate against me must carry—and must rightly carry—a certain amount of weight with those to whom I have to appeal. When you find the learned Solicitor-General engaged in the case, and when his great legal knowledge is not enough to conduct it without the assistance of two other counsel learned in the Law, you must come to the conclusion that you have two great criminals before you, because if it were not so, the prosecution would not go into the very large expenses entailed in this case. I might feel less hopeful of success did I pretend to rival the learned Solicitor-General in legal knowledge, in force of tongue, or in skill in dialectic. But, gentlemen, I do not rely on these: I rely on a far mightier power; I trust to the goodness of my cause. . . ."

She then proceeded to show that the indictment was wrongly framed and bad; the larger part of the address dealt, indeed, with the purely legal and

BIRTH-CONTROL

moral aspects of the case, obviously got up by Bradlaugh. The physiological details involved were left to the latter. Mrs Besant also took the usual course of showing that passages equal to those complained of could be found in the literary "classics." All this was done with great skill and Mrs Besant showed that she was not unfamiliar with the art of "managing" a judge and jury, as the following exchange shows:

MRS BESANT: My lord, I don't know whether I am going out of my case, but I think if the light could be prevented from falling on the jury-box, it would be an improvement. It is a great point to me to keep the jury in good temper, my lord. (Laughter).

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE (directing the change to be made): I must do you the justice to say, that up to this time you have said nothing that could produce any other result.

Mrs Besant made witty play with the mysterious identity of the prosecution. She pictured one Simonds, a detective, who had been the effective agent, and who was in receipt of wages of 31s. 6d. a week, saving up from earliest childhood, as soon as the *Fruits of Philosophy* was published, making it the far-off ideal of his life one day to be able to retain the Solicitor-General to prosecute it. She then turned to the general problem of increase of population and the desirability of checking it. After speaking for nearly two half-days, her address extends to 120 closely printed pages, scarcely interrupted from beginning to end, the Lord Chief Justice

listening with an admiration which is obvious from his occasional comments, Mrs Besant resumed her seat.

Bradlaugh then delivered his address, which dealt with further points of law and with the physiological details, supporting evidence was heard, and at the beginning of the fourth day Mrs Besant and Bradlaugh made their final speeches, as did the Solicitor-General. He again managed to mingle horror of Knowlton's language with language of his own which, even in a verbatim report, it was impossible to reduce to print.

The Lord Chief Justice summed up fairly, but definitely in favour of the defendants (although he afterwards denied that he had done so). "A more ill-advised and more injudicious proceeding in the way of a prosecution," he said, "was probably never brought into a court of justice." He commented strongly on the absence of an acknowledged prosecuting party, the identity of which the Solicitor-General had refused to state. If we may venture on a guess, what of the Christian Evidence Society, which had vanished from the visible scene after the earliest stages? However that may be the Judge refuted a considerable proportion of the Solicitor-General's propositions, and left the rest to the jury.

After retiring for over an hour and a half the foreman of the jury announced: "We are unanimously of opinion that the book in question is calculated to deprave the public morals, but at the same time we entirely exonerate the defendants from any

BIRTH-CONTROL

corrupt motives in publishing it." Mrs Besant says that on these words the Judge looked troubled, and his words confirm this. He said: "I am afraid, gentlemen, I must direct you, on that finding, to return a verdict of guilty under this indictment against the defendants." "On that," Mrs Besant tells us, "some of the jury turned to leave the box, it having been agreed—we heard later from one of them—that if the verdict were not accepted in that form they should retire again, as six of the jury were against convicting us; but the foreman, who was bitterly hostile, jumped at the chance of snatching a conviction, and none of those in our favour had the courage to contradict him on the spur of the moment, so the foreman's 'Guilty' passed, and the judge set us free, on Mr Bradlaugh's recognizances to come up for judgement on that day week."

A week later, on 28 June, Bradlaugh and Mrs Besant attended before Lord Chief Justice Cockburn and Mr Justice Mellor, to receive judgement. Proceedings began with an exchange from which Mr P. G. Wodehouse would certainly have derived inspiration; here is a specimen:

THE SOLICITOR-GENERAL: I have not got the *postea* in court, but I understand it is being prepared.

THE LORD CHIEF JUSTICE. I don't understand why it has not been prepared.

THE SOLICITOR-GENERAL: My Lord, we have taken steps to get it prepared, and I believe that at this moment it is being prepared.

After some thirty ripostes and counter-ripostes of

MRS ANNIE BESANT

this sort and on the same subject, Mr Bradlaugh and Mrs Besant moved to quash the indictment on technical grounds. It is a curious thing that Mrs Besant, who knew nothing of law and must have been prepared by Bradlaugh, undoubtedly took the legal points better than her mentor and nearly always convinced the Judges. However, the Judges decided against a new trial and held that the indictment could not be quashed. The question of judgement was then arrived at. The Chief Justice was friendly, but when it transpired that the defendants had continued the sale of the book after the verdict and intended to continue to sell it, he took a serious view of the matter. He sentenced each defendant to imprisonment for six months, a fine of £200, and to recognizances of £500 for two years.

Bradlaugh and Mrs Besant then appealed, the case coming before Lord Justices Bramwell, Brett, and Cotter, who on various technical grounds reversed the judgement of the lower court, and so the two defendants went free.

To drive the lesson home the Knowlton pamphlet was withdrawn and Mrs Besant wrote a more considered and up-to-date book on the same subject and from the same point of view, entitled *The Law of Population*. This book had a wide circulation and was translated into several languages. Bradlaugh, on his side, brought an action against the police for the recovery of the pamphlets they had seized, won the action, and sold the

BIRTH-CONTROL

pamphlets with the words "Recovered from the police," stamped across them. It is not difficult to understand why smug conservatism hated the two musketeers!

Even though no counsel had been employed, the conduct of the case cost the partners over £1200, every penny of which was subscribed by the public. So was won the victory, not a famous one, but none the less effective. But before the story can be completed it is necessary to anticipate. For fourteen years Mrs Besant strenuously advocated birth-control; hundreds of thousands of copies of *The Law of Population* were sold; and Mrs Besant's name was revered by many a wife to whom her courage and determination had brought some measure of relief. Now suddenly, in 1891, after joining the Theosophical Society, Mrs Besant withdrew her book and began the opposition to birth-control which she maintained ever after. This action appears to me nothing less than a tragedy. To have dared so much and to have achieved so fully, only to abandon all at the bidding of a Mme Blavatsky, this seems the episode in Mrs Besant's life one finds it most difficult to pardon.

What was Mrs Besant's justification? I cannot attempt to explain her argument, for to me it is unintelligible; I will merely quote her case in full: "What is man in the light of Theosophy? He is a spiritual intelligence, eternal and uncreate, treading a vast cycle of human experience, born and reborn on earth millennium after millennium, evolving

MRS ANNIE BESANT

slowly into the ideal man. He is not the product of matter, but is encased in matter, and the forms of matter with which he clothes himself are of his own making. For the intelligence and will of man are creative forces—not creative *ex nihilo*, but creative as is the brain of the painter—and these forces are exercised by man in every act of thought. Thus he is ever creating round him thought-forms, moulding subtlest matter into shape by these energies, forms which persist as tangible realities when the body of the thinker has long gone back to earth and air and water. When the time for rebirth into this earth-life comes for the soul, these thought-forms, its own progeny, help to form the tenuous model into which the molecules of physical matter are builded for the making of the body, and matter is thus moulded for the new body in which the soul is to dwell, on the lines laid down by the intelligent and volitional life of the previous, or of many previous, incarnations. So does each man create for himself in verity the form wherein he functions, and what he is in his present is the inevitable outcome of his own creative energies in his past.

“Applying this to the neo-Malthusian theory, we see in sexual love not only a passion which man has in common with the brute, and which forms, at the present stage of evolution, a necessary part of human nature, but an animal passion that may be trained and purified into a human emotion, which may be used as one of the levers in human progress, one of the factors in human growth. But, instead of this,

BIRTH-CONTROL

man in the past has made his intellect the servant of his passions; the abnormal development of the sexual instinct in man—in whom it is far greater and more continuous than in any brute—is due to the mingling with it of the intellectual element, all sexual thoughts, desires, and imaginations having created thought-forms, which have been wrought into the human race, giving rise to a continual demand far beyond nature, and in marked contrast with the temperance of normal animal life. Hence it has become one of the most fruitful sources of human misery and human degradation, and the satisfaction of its imperious cravings in civilized countries lies at the root of our worst social evils. This excessive development has to be fought against, and the instinct reduced within natural limits, and this will certainly never be done by easy-going self-indulgence outside it. By none other road than that of self-control and self-denial can men and women now set going the causes which will build for them brains and bodies of a higher type for their future return to earth-life. They have to hold this instinct in complete control, to transmute it from passion into tender and self-denying affection, to develop the intellectual at the expense of the animal, and thus to raise the whole man to the human stage, in which every intellectual and physical capacity shall subserve the purposes of the soul. From all this it follows that Theosophists should sound the note of self-restraint within marriage, and the gradual—for with the mass it cannot be sudden—restriction

MRS ANNIE BESANT

of the sexual relation to the perpetuation of the race.”

For the same reasons that I shall give later on when writing of Theosophy, I do not propose to comment in any way on these views.

XII

A CHRISTIAN FATHER

THE polemics of the Knowlton trial produced several bitter pamphlets from Mrs Besant. In *Is the Bible Indictable?* she collected the passages in the Bible which ought, according to the Lord Chief Justice's ruling, to be regarded as obscene. *Christian Progress* does the same for a collection of hymnals, incidentally revealing some really startling passages. Similar, again, is *The Fruits of Christianity*. A more positive contribution is a booklet entitled *Marriage: as it was, as it is, and as it should be*.

The forces of respectability, however, still had a shot in their locker. In August 1875 the Rev. Frank Besant had taken the somewhat unusual course of, in effect, trying to kidnap Mabel while she was on her annual visit to him. Mrs Besant had to threaten a writ of *habeas corpus* before the little girl was returned. But now Mr Besant had a golden opportunity ready to his hand to revenge himself on his erring wife. He saw clearly that with the double charge of blasphemy and immorality levelled against her, Mrs Besant would have small chance of resisting him with any hope of success. Accordingly, soon after the termination of the Knowlton proceedings, we find the Rev. Frank giving notice of his intention

MRS ANNIE BESANT

to apply to the High Court of Chancery to deprive Mrs Besant of the one child of which she had been given the custody.

The petition was not filed until April 1878, when it came up before the Master of the Rolls, Sir George Jessel.¹ Mrs Besant's estimate of him is not likely to be disputed. She said of him that he was "a man animated by the old spirit of Hebrew bigotry, to which he had added the time-serving morality of a 'man of the world,' sceptical as to all sincerity, and contemptuous of all devotion to an unpopular cause." Jessel lived up to his reputation for brusqueness (as his contemporaries politely called his insolent self-confidence and overbearing manners), on Mrs Besant's first appearance. Mrs Besant had recently been congratulated, as we have seen, by no mean authorities on her handling of the Knowlton case, yet she was greeted with the exclamation: "Appear in person? A lady appear in person? Never heard of such a thing! Does the lady really appear in person?" On being assured that she did and after making various further remarks of the same kind, the Master of the Rolls turned to Mrs Besant:

MASTER OF THE ROLLS: "Is this the lady?"

MRS BESANT: "I am the respondent, my lord, Mrs Besant."

MASTER OF THE ROLLS: "Then I advise you, Mrs Besant, to employ counsel to represent you, if you can afford it; and I suppose you can."

¹ There is a full account of this hearing in *The Times*, which corroborates Mrs Besant's statements at every point. I have therefore not hesitated to use these two reports together.

A CHRISTIAN FATHER

MRS BESANT: "With all submission to your lordship, I am afraid I must claim my right of arguing my case in person."

MASTER OF THE ROLLS: "You will do so if you please, of course, but I think you had much better appear by counsel. I give you notice that, if you do not, you must not expect to be shown any consideration. You will not be heard by me at any greater length than the case requires, nor allowed to go into irrelevant matter, as persons who argue their own cases usually do."

MRS BESANT: "I trust I shall not do so, my lord; but in any case I shall be arguing under your lordship's complete control."

After this excellent beginning Mr Besant's counsel opened his case. The grounds for the petition were Mrs Besant's advocacy of atheistic doctrines, her association with Bradlaugh, and the publication with him of, *inter alia*, the *Fruits of Philosophy*. Little Mabel, it appeared, had been given no religious instruction. Up to the time of the separation, Mr Besant declared, she had known the Lord's Prayer and other simple prayers by heart. Afterwards there was a great change. On saying "Good night, God bless you" to Mabel, she had replied that her mother had said there was no God. Counsel submitted that a girl "brought up by such a mother must be shunned by respectable women and could expect no good either here or hereafter."

Mrs Besant, according to *The Times*, "argued that no case was made out for the removal of the child.

MRS ANNIE BESANT

She quite admitted her views on religious subjects, but she had never taught those views to the child. She thought that a child should be brought up without any particular religious belief, so that when old enough it could select such religion as it thought fit. She denied having given her daughter any anti-religious instruction, though she had desired no religious education should be given her. She did not like her to have the New Testament, on the ground that there were passages in it not fit for children to understand, and she had told her she could read the Bible when old enough to understand it. As to the immoral book, the whole of that was really no more than would be found in any medical book, and very much the same things as the Government allowed to be taught young girls in their physiological classes at South Kensington. She had never taught the physiological facts to her own daughter, although she did think they ought to be known by all young people. She submitted that if that book entitled the Court to remove her child, then all medical booksellers would be liable to the same jurisdiction. She further contended that she had always brought up the child most carefully and with every attention to her health and welfare."

The Master of the Rolls admitted the last contention, but on every other point he dismissed Mrs Besant's argument. He spoke of her and of her work in the bitterest language, declared that her "character was tainted," that "one could not expect modest women to associate with her," and made

A CHRISTIAN FATHER

many similar observations. As, however, his attitude had made the result a foregone conclusion from the beginning, it was no surprise when he granted Mr Besant's petition. In a leader *The Times* completed the good work by giving a plain hint that Mrs Besant was leading an immoral life.

The child was taken away, and Mrs Besant gave notice that if she were denied access she would sue for restitution of conjugal rights. But at this point she broke down, as is not surprising, and was seriously ill. Again Mr Besant did not miss the opportunity, and when Mrs Besant recovered she found that during her illness he had obtained an order forbidding her to bring any suit against him. She took steps to set this aside, and even the stern Jessel was angry when he learned that she had been deprived of all access and of the money due to her under the deed of separation. But, apart from this, the law as it then stood was all for the husband: it was held that the deed of separation should be revoked so far as it gave Mrs Besant custody of Mabel and upheld so far as it prevented Mrs Besant from bringing any action against her husband. Mr Besant had triumphed all along the line. But just as there was a mystery about the source of the funds for the Knowlton prosecution, so there appears to be a mystery as to the source from which Mr Besant derived the means for prosecuting these several actions. He himself certainly could not have afforded them.

The story has a sequel, after an interval of over ten years. I will let Mr Digby Besant tell the story

MRS ANNIE BESANT

himself. He, it will be remembered, had been in his father's custody since infancy, unlike his sister Mabel. Yet, he writes, "I had long ago made up my mind that as soon as I came of age I should go and see my mother and judge matters for myself. Accordingly I wrote to my father, telling him of my intention. He replied in a long letter, warning me against my proposed action and refusing to receive any further communication from me. He also sent me all my personal belongings from Sibsey and as Mabel took the same line as I did, he severed relations with her equally with myself. Looking back, it seems inconceivable to me why he should have acted so drastically. Children are not involved in the disagreements of their parents, and our desire—a perfectly natural and reasonable desire—to see our mother was assuredly not designed in any spirit of antagonism to himself."

So the Rev. Frank Besant, stern, unyielding, pathetic in his futile hunger for revenge, faded from Mrs Besant's life.

XIII

POLITICS AND SCIENCE

ALL through these troubles Mrs Besant continued her Freethought work. In 1877 she collected her early pamphlets, the stepping-stones, as it were, to her present position, in a single volume entitled *My Path to Atheism*. Now she devoted many of her lectures to the current political difficulties, speaking always on the side of the bottom dog. In 1878 she had already made a special study of the French Revolution, delivering a series of six lectures at the South Place Institute, afterwards published as a *History of the Great French Revolution*. In the following year she translated, never forgetting her major pre-occupation, Emile Acollas's *The Idea of God in the Revolution. English Republicanism* following in 1878, as well as *England, India and Afghanistan*. Such titles as these tell their own story: *The Story of Afghanistan: or why the Tory Government gags the Indian Press* (1879), *Coercion in Ireland and its Results* (1880), *Force no Remedy* (1882). In 1883 Mrs Besant again turned for inspiration to the French Revolution, bringing out *Civil and Religious Liberty, with some Hints taken from the French Revolution*, as well as a second series of lectures on the history of the revolution. In 1885 followed *Gordon Judged out of his*

MRS ANNIE BESANT

own Mouth and *The Story of the Soudan*, and in 1887 *England's Jubilee Gift to Ireland*.

At about the same time Mrs Besant became interested, no doubt through the need for study in connection with *The Law of Population*, in scientific subjects. She determined to acquire a scientific education and fortunately at that time made the acquaintance of Dr Aveling, who acted as her tutor. By June 1879 she had matriculated at London University, and soon after, Dr Aveling having publicly joined the National Secular Society, he was dismissed from his Chair in the University. As a result classes were started at the Hall of Science, which Mrs Besant attended, in due course taking advanced certificates as a science teacher in eight subjects.

“Personally,” wrote Mrs Besant with great modesty, “I found that this study and teaching together with attendance at classes held for teachers at South Kensington, the study for passing the First B.Sc. and Prel. Sc. Examinations at London University, and the study for the B.Sc. degree at London, at which I failed in practical chemistry three times—a thing that puzzled me not a little at the time, as I had passed a far more difficult practical chemical examination for teachers at South Kensington—all this gave me a knowledge of science that has stood me in good stead in my public work.”

Even here, however, Society thought it necessary to defend itself against Mrs Besant. “When Miss Bradlaugh and myself applied for permission to

POLITICS AND SCIENCE

attend the botany class at University College, we were refused, I for my sins, and she only for being her father's daughter; when I had qualified as teacher, I stood back from claiming recognition from the Department for a year in order not to prejudice the claims of Mr Bradlaugh's daughters, and later, when I had been recognized, Sir Henry Tyler in the House of Commons attacked the Education Department for accepting me, and actually tried to prevent the Government grant being paid to the Hall of Science Schools because Dr Aveling, the Misses Bradlaugh, and myself were unbelievers in Christianity. When I asked permission to go to the Botanical Gardens in Regent's Park the curator refused it, on the ground that his daughters studied there. On every side repulse and insult, hard to struggle against, bitter to bear. It was against difficulties of this kind on every side that we had to make our way, handicapped in every effort by our heresy. Let our work be as good as it might—and our Science School was exceptionally successful—the subtle fragrance of heresy was everywhere distinguishable, and when Mr Bradlaugh and myself are blamed for bitterness in our anti-Christian advocacy, this constant gnawing annoyance and petty persecution should be taken into account. For him it was especially trying, for he saw his daughters—girls of ability and of high character, whose only crime was that they were his—insulted, sneered at, slandered, continually put at a disadvantage, because they were his children and loved and honoured him beyond all others."

MRS ANNIE BESANT

Needless to say, as soon as Mrs Besant had learned she began to teach, delivering regular lectures at the Hall of Science. A series of lectures on elementary physics was printed in book form under the title of *Light, Heat and Sound* (1881), while a more popular series on the same subject became *Eyes and Ears* (1882). Four lectures on digestion, organs of digestion, respiration, and circulation, became a booklet entitled *Physiology of Home* (1882). In 1882 was also delivered and published a set of lectures on electricity. Two years before Mrs Besant had translated Büchner's substantial volume on *Mind in Animals*, as well as his short *Influence of Heredity on Free Will*. She also published a pamphlet on vivisection, advocating the practice; "it is," she said afterwards, "the one thing I ever wrote for which I feel deep regret and shame."

During these years Mrs Besant also took an active part in the work of Charles Bradlaugh, his struggle in and out of Parliament for the right to think, his defence against actions for blasphemy, and all the hurly-burly of the Freethought movement in that stormy decade.

She had now for some time been earning a comfortable living with her lecturing and writing, and her life must by no means be pictured as a sordid round of agitation and contest. She had a comfortable home in which she was happy to entertain her friends, among whom one stands head and shoulders above the rest, Charles Bradlaugh. "He was," wrote Mrs Besant, "the merriest of companions in our rare

POLITICS AND SCIENCE

hours of relaxation; for many years he was wont to come to my house in the morning, after the hours always set aside by him for receiving poor men who wanted advice on legal and other matters—for he was a veritable poor man's lawyer, always ready to help and counsel—and, bringing his books and papers, he would sit writing, hour after hour, I equally busy with my own work, now and then perhaps exchanging a word, breaking off just for lunch and dinner, and working on again in the evening till about ten o'clock—he always went early to bed when at home—he would take himself off again to his lodgings, about three-quarters of a mile away. Sometimes he would play cards for an hour, euchre being our favourite game. But while we were mostly busy and grave, we would make holiday sometimes, and then he was like a boy, brimming over with mirth, full of quaint turns of thought and speech. All the country round London has for me bright memories of our wanderings—Richmond, where we tramped across the park, and sat under its mighty trees; Windsor, with its groves of bracken; Kew, where we had tea in a funny little room, with watercress *ad libitum*; Hampton Court, with its dishevelled beauties; Maidenhead and Taplow, where the river was the attraction; and, above all, Broxbourne, where he delighted to spend the day with his fishing-rod, wandering along the river, of which he knew every eddy. For he was a great fisherman, and he taught me all the mysteries of the craft, mirthfully disdainful of my dislike of the fish when I had caught them."

MRS ANNIE BESANT

There is no doubt that if they had been free Bradlaugh and Mrs Besant would have married. As it was they neither of them had the wish to indulge in an intrigue, which would, moreover, in their position, have been fatal to both. They remained devoted friends and colleagues, and though Bradlaugh was in the end disappointed in her, she never had anything but praise and admiration for him.

XIV

SOCIAL PROTEST

IN the autumn of 1867, before her marriage, Annie Wood and her mother were staying with some friends near Manchester. Their host, Mr Roberts, was a friend of Ernest Jones, a "poor man's lawyer," and an enemy of oppression. "He worked hard in the agitation which saved women from working in the mines, and I have heard him tell how he had seen them toiling, naked to the waist, with short petticoats barely reaching to their knees, rough, foul-tongued, brutalized out of all womanly decency and grace; and how he had seen little children working there too, babies of three and four set to watch a door, and falling asleep at their work to be roused by curse and kick to the unfair toil."

This old man was the first to open Annie's eyes to the social injustice which surrounded her. At every opportunity he instructed her in the elements of economics, giped at her ignorance of the truth about even a man like John Bright, and, in short, did all he could to awaken her social conscience. It so happened that during her stay in Manchester two Fenians, Colonel Kelly and Captain Deasy, were arrested there. The large Irish population of Manchester was up in arms, the police van carrying the prisoners

MRS ANNIE BESANT

to gaol was stormed, a constable in it was accidentally killed, and several of the rescuers were arrested and subsequently put up for trial. "Lawyer Roberts" undertook the defence. A Special Commission was issued, with the "hanging judge," Mr Justice Blackburn, at its head, and the proceedings were so hurried on that in little more than a month the trial opened. At the magistrates' hearing the prisoners were brought up in irons and, all protests being in vain, their counsel, Ernest Jones, threw down his brief and left the court.

Mrs Besant, after describing the tumultuous crowd outside the court, goes on: "Alas! if there was passion on behalf of the prisoners outside, there was passion against them within, and the very opening of the trial showed the spirit that animated the prosecution and the bench. Digby Seymour, Q.C., and Ernest Jones, were briefed for the defence, and Mr Roberts did not think that they exercised sufficiently their right of challenge; he knew, as we all did, that many on the panel had loudly proclaimed their hostility to the Irish, and Mr Roberts persisted in challenging them as his counsel would not. In vain Judge Blackburn threatened to commit the rebellious solicitor; 'These men's lives are at stake, my lord,' was his indignant plea. 'Remove that man!' cried the angry judge, but as the officers of the court came forward very slowly—for all poor men loved and honoured the sturdy fighter—he changed his mind and let him stay. Despite all his efforts, the jury contained a man who had declared

SOCIAL PROTEST

that he 'didn't care what the evidence was, he would hang every d——d Irishman of the lot.' And the result showed that he was not alone in his view, for evidence of the most disreputable kind was admitted; women of the lowest type were put into the box as witnesses, and their word taken as unchallengable; thus was destroyed an *alibi* for Maguire, afterwards accepted by the Crown, a free pardon being issued on the strength of it. Nothing could save the doomed men from the determined verdict, and I could see from where I was sitting into a little room behind the bench, where an official was quietly preparing the black caps before the verdict had been delivered. The foregone 'Guilty' was duly repeated as verdict on each of the five cases, and the prisoners asked if they had anything to say why sentence of death should not be passed on them. Allen, boy as he was, made a very brave and manly speech; he had not fired, save in the air—if he had done so he might have escaped; he had helped to free Kelly and Deasy, and did not regret it; he was willing to die for Ireland. Maguire and Condon (he also was reprieved) declared they were not present, but, like Allen, were ready to die for their country. Sentence of death was passed, and, as echo to the sardonic 'The Lord have mercy on your souls,' rang back from the dock in five clear voices, with never a quiver of fear in them, 'God save Ireland!' and the men passed one by one from the sight of my tear-dimmed eyes.

"It was a sorrowful time that followed; the despair

MRS ANNIE BESANT

of the heart-broken girl who was Allen's sweetheart, and who cried to us on her knees, 'Save my William!' was hard to see; nothing we or anyone could do availed to avert the doom, and on November 23rd Allen, Larkin, and O'Brien were hanged outside Salford Gaol. Had they striven for freedom in Italy England would have honoured them; here she buried them as common murderers in quicklime in the prison yard."

There is little evidence that this experience made any lasting impression on Mrs Besant; but such days cannot be lived through in vain. As soon as her eyes had been opened to the world around her by contact with Bradlaugh, Mrs Besant remembered, and remembering, acted, as was always her way. First came her advocacy of birth-control, which, though it began as a Freethought gesture, soon became a sincere conviction based on the desperate need of bringing help to the thousands of poverty-stricken and overcrowded homes. Then came her studies into the history of the French Revolution, and the protests against injustice in Ireland, Afghanistan, India, and the Soudan. Towards the end of 1879 Charles Bradlaugh called a conference, which she attended, to consider the question of the reform of the land laws. (At this conference, incidentally, she first met Herbert Burrows). As a result Mrs Besant was led to study various social problems, the nature of which can be judged from a series of printed lectures which she brought out. In 1880 a very popular pamphlet appeared entitled *Landlords*,

SOCIAL PROTEST

Tenant Farmers, and Laborers. In the following year she gave a series of lectures on England before the repeal of the Corn Laws, the history of the anti-Corn Law struggle, labour and land, free trade, and the landlords' attempt to mislead the landless; these were published in book form under the title *Free Trade versus "Fair" Trade. The English Land System* following in 1882. These and the following years were also occupied, as we have seen, with Bradlaugh's various struggles, in which Mrs Besant saw injustice, oppression, intolerance, and brutality enough to goad even the most insensitive into active protest.

XV

SOCIALISM

By the end of 1883 a growing interest in Socialism is noticeable in Annie Besant's writings, especially in *The National Reformer*. In February 1884 she came across a report of the meeting of the Democratic Federation, and later a speech by Hyndman. In April followed a then sensational debate on Socialism between Bradlaugh and Hyndman, the former being an uncompromising individualist, in this at least a true child of his generation. It was at this time that she met Mr Shaw, with whom she inevitably clashed, but whose genius she was one of the first to perceive.

Even before this, in 1883, she had felt the need for some organ independent of Bradlaugh, in which she could freely express her personal political views. The result was *Our Corner*, a weekly paper, founded and edited by Mrs Besant, of which twelve volumes appeared until 1888, when it was discontinued. *Our Corner* is of course immortalized by reason of the first appearance in its pages of Mr Shaw's novels *The Irrational Knot* and *Love Among the Artists*. Beside these there appeared many important contributions in Mrs Besant's paper, of which only a few can be mentioned: "The Force of Heredity," by Ludwig Büchner; "The Story of Ladislav Bolski,"



Photo by H. S. Mendelssohn

MRS BESANT IN 1885

SOCIALISM

by Victor Cherbuliez; "Shakespeare the Dramatist," by E. B. Aveling; "Letters of James Thomson"; "Concerning Interest," by G. Bernard Shaw; "Poems in Prose," by Iwan Turgeneff; "A Refutation of Anarchism," by G. Bernard Shaw; "Rome: a Sermon in Sociology," by Sidney Webb; "The Chartist Movement," by Graham Wallas; "Firdusi," by James Thomson; "Democracy," by Edward Carpenter; "The Transition to Social Democracy," by G. Bernard Shaw; "The Economic Aspect of Socialism," by George Bernard Shaw; as well as many contributions of various kinds by Annie Besant herself, Charles and Hypatia Bradlaugh, Leopold Katscher, Gertrude Layard, E. Nesbit, J. M. Robertson, Bernard Shaw, and many others.

By June 1884 we find Mrs Besant declaring for an eight hour-day and a five-day week. In January 1885 she wrote: "Christian charity? We know its work. It gives a hundredweight of coal and five pounds of beef once a year to a family whose head could earn a hundred such doles if Christian justice allowed him fair wages for the work he performs. It plunders the workers of the wealth they make, and then flings back at them a thousandth part of their own product as 'charity.' It builds hospitals for the poor whom it has poisoned in filthy courts and alleys, and work-houses for the worn-out creatures from whom it has wrung every energy, every hope, every joy. Miss Cobbe summons us to admire Christian civilization, and we see idlers flaunting in the robes woven by the toilers, a glittering tinselled superstructure founded

MRS ANNIE BESANT

on the tears, the strugglings, the grey, hopeless misery of the poor.”

Criticized by Freethought supporters for her advocacy of rate-supported meals for Board School children, Mrs Besant “dreaded to make the plunge of publicly allying myself with the advocates of Socialism, because of the attitude of bitter hostility they had adopted towards Mr Bradlaugh. On his strong, tenacious nature, nurtured on self-reliant individualism, the arguments of the younger generation made no impression. He could not change his methods because a new tendency was rising to the surface, and he did not see how different was the Socialism of our day to the Socialist dreams of the past—noble ideals of a future not immediately realizable in truth, but to be worked towards and rendered possible in the days to come. Could I take public action which might bring me into collision with the dearest of my friends, which might strain the strong and tender tie so long existing between us? My affection, my gratitude, all warred against the idea of working with those who wronged him so bitterly. But the cry of starving children was ever in my ears; the sobs of women poisoned in lead works, exhausted in nail works, driven to prostitution by starvation, made old and haggard by ceaseless work. I saw their misery was the result of an evil system, was inseparable from private ownership of the instruments of wealth production; that while the worker was himself but an instrument, selling his labour under the law of supply and demand, he must

SOCIALISM

remain helpless in the grip of the employing classes and that trade combinations could only mean increased warfare—necessary, indeed, for the time as weapons of defence—but meaning war, not brotherly co-operation of all for the good of all. A conflict which was stripped of all covering, a conflict between a personal tie and a call of duty could not last long and with a heavy heart I made up my mind to profess Socialism openly and work for it with all my energy. Happily, Mr Bradlaugh was as tolerant as he was strong, and our private friendship remained unbroken; but he never again felt the same confidence in my judgement as he felt before, nor did he any more consult me on his own policy, as he had done ever since we first clasped hands.”

Such considerations often made Annie Besant pause, but never for long. In 1885 we find her publishing a series of articles making plain her adhesion to Socialism and her reasons for doing so.

In *The Redistribution of Political Power* (1885) is traced the results of the Reform Bills of 1832, 1867 and 1884, with an indication of the lines which should be followed by future progress. The following passage from this pamphlet shows the direction in which Annie Besant's mind was working at this period: “There can be no doubt in the minds of reasonable people that a ten-hours' day is too long. . . . The new Parliament should pass an Eight Hours Bill, making the legal day a day of eight hours only, and giving one half-holiday in the week, so that the weekly hours of labor shall not exceed

MRS ANNIE BESANT

forty-four. In time to come I trust that the hours of labor will be yet further shortened, but the passage of an Eight Hours' Bill would mark a good step forward. Looking at the question from a rational point of view, it is surely clear that a human being should not be required to give more than eight hours out of the twenty-four—one-third of his time—for absolute bread-winning. Another seven or eight hours must be given to sleep, leaving eight for meals, exercise, recreation, and study. The last eight are short enough for their varied uses, and I look forward to a time when the first section shall be shortened and the third lengthened; but if every worker had even eight hours of freedom in the day, his life would be a far more human and far more beautiful thing than it is at the present time."

In a pamphlet entitled *Why I am a Socialist* (1886), which had a very wide circulation, Annie Besant arranges her reasons under three heads: "I am a Socialist because I am a believer in Evolution," "I am a Socialist because of the failure of our present civilization," and "I am a Socialist because the poverty of the workers is, and must continue to be, an integral part of the present method of wealth-production and wealth-distribution." The first of these arguments is developed in *The Evolution of Society* (1886), in which there is shown to be a progressively evolutionary scheme in the development of Society to industrialism and from industrialism to socialism. "The conflict between social and anti-social tendencies has existed as long as

SOCIALISM

Society itself," writes Annie Besant in the same pamphlet. "It is the contest between the integrating and disintegrating forces, between the brute survival and the human evolution. The individual struggle for existence which had gone on through countless centuries over the whole world had become to some extent modified among the social animals, and savage man, as the highest of these, had also modified it within the limits of each community. As Society progressed slowly in civilization, the contest went on between the surviving brutal, or savage, desire for personal accumulation, and personal aggrandizement without regard for others, and the social desire for general prosperity and happiness with the readiness to subordinate the individual to the general good."

In opposition to this, or, in Annie Besant's own words, "Over against those who laud the present state of Society with its unjustly rich and unjustly poor, with its palaces and its slums, its millionaires and its paupers, be it ours to proclaim that there is a higher ideal in life than that of being first in the scramble for gold. Be it ours to declare steadfastly that health, comfort, leisure, culture, plenty for every individual, are far more desirable than breathless struggle for existence, furious trampling down of the weak by the strong, huge fortunes accumulated out of the toil of others, to be handed down to those who have done nothing to earn them. Be it ours to maintain that the greatness of a nation depends not on the number of its great proprietors, on the wealth

MRS ANNIE BESANT

of its great capitalists, on the splendor of its great nobles; but on the absence of poverty among its people, on the education of its masses, on the universality of enjoyment in life." And this was the ideal which Annie Besant set up for the socialist to follow: "Enough for each of work, of leisure, of joy; too little for none; such is the Social Ideal. Better to strive for it worthily, and fail, than to die without striving for it at all."

In 1885 she sealed her adhesion to Socialism by joining the Fabian Society, of which she was for several years one of the leading members. Mr Shaw has described the episode once and for all, and I will make no attempt to paraphrase his account, which was written for Mrs Besant's Jubilee. "In selecting the Fabian Society for her passage through Socialism Annie Besant made a very sound choice; for it was the only one of the three Socialist societies then competing with one another in which there was anything to be learnt that she did not already know. It was managed by a small group of men who were not only very clever individually, but broken into team work with one another so effectually that they raised the value of the Society's output far above that of the individual output of any one of them. They were not only reducing Socialism to a practical political programme on the ordinary constitutional lines, but devising an administrative machinery for it in the light of a practical knowledge of how Government works (some of them being Government officials of the upper division), in which the other

SOCIALISM

societies were hopelessly deficient. This was exactly what Annie Besant needed at that moment to complete her equipment. But it could not hold her when once she had rapidly learnt what she could from it. To begin with, it was unheroic; and the secret of her collaboration with Bradlaugh had been that she, too, was as essentially heroic in her methods as in her power, courage, and oratorical genius. Now Fabianism was in reaction against the heroics by which Socialism had suffered so much in 1871: its mission was to make Socialism as possible as Liberalism or Conservatism for the pottering suburban voter who desired to go to church because his neighbours did, and to live always on the side of the police. It recognized the truth for political purposes of Mark Twain's saying: 'The average man is a coward.' And Annie Besant, with her heroic courage and energy, was wasted on work that had not some element of danger and extreme arduousness in it.

"Besides, considering the world from Shakespeare's point of view as a stage on which all the men and women are merely players, Annie Besant, a player of genius, was a tragedienne. Comedy was not her clue to life: she had a healthy sense of fun; but no truth came to her first as a joke. Injustice, waste, and the defeat of noble aspirations did not revolt her by way of irony and paradox: they stirred her to direct and powerful indignation and to active resistance. Now the Fabian vein was largely the vein of comedy, and its conscience a sense of irony. We laughed at Socialism and laughed at ourselves

MRS ANNIE BESANT

a good deal. In me especially, as events have proved, there was latent a vocation for the theatre which was to give to tragedy itself the tactics of comedy. It attracted and amused Annie Besant for a time, and I conceived an affection for her in which I have never since wavered; but in the end the apparently heartless levity with which I spoke and acted in matters which seemed deeply serious, before I had achieved enough to show that I had a perspective in which they really lost their importance, and before she had realized that her own destiny was to be one which would also dwarf them, must have made it very hard for her to work with me at times.

“ There were less subtle difficulties also in the way. The direction of the Fabian Society was done so efficiently by the little group of men already in possession, that Annie Besant must have found, as other women found later on, that as far as what may be called its indoor work was concerned, she was wasting her time as fifth wheel to the coach. The Fabians were never tired of saying that you should do nothing that somebody else was doing well enough already, and Annie Besant had too much practical sense not to have made this rule for herself already. She, therefore, became a sort of expeditionary force, always to the front when there was trouble and danger, carrying away audiences for us when the dissensions in the movement brought our policy into conflict with that of the other societies, founding branches for us throughout the country, dashing into the great strikes and free-speech agitations of that time

SOCIALISM

(the eighteen-eighties), forming on her own initiative such *ad hoc* organizations as were necessary to make them effective, and generally leaving the routine to us and taking the fighting on herself. Her powers of continuous work were prodigious. Her displays of personal courage and resolution, as when she would march into a police-court, make her way to the witness-stand, and compel the magistrate to listen to her by sheer force of style and character, were trifles compared to the way in which she worked day and night to pull through the strike of the over-exploited matchgirls who had walked into her office one day and asked her to help them somehow, anyhow. An attempt to keep pace with her on the part of a mere man generally wrecked the man: those who were unselfish enough to hold out to the end usually collapsed and added the burden of nursing them to her already superhuman labours."

Always unwearied in propaganda Mrs Besant conducted, in 1887, a four days' debate (those were spacious days!) with Mr Foote, who opposed Socialism, and a written debate with Bradlaugh. She also joined the famous Charing Cross Parliament, in which a Socialist government was formed with Mrs Besant as Home Secretary and Mr Shaw as President of the Local Government Board. In October she resigned her co-editorship of *The National Reformer*: as usual it was all or nothing with her.

But Annie Besant's socialist experiences at this time were not confined to pen and paper. In the

MRS ANNIE BESANT

same October of 1887 occurred one of the events which form the landmarks of English Socialism. It was a bitter winter, unemployment was exceptionally severe, and the unemployed, for want of anything better to do, and desperate of obtaining help, formed processions. These were brutally interfered with by the police, under the Tory Sir Charles Warren, so that a Socialist Defence Association was formed to protect and bail out men who had been unjustifiably "run in." This is the sort of thing that happened: three men were arrested for precisely the same alleged offence, two of them were "gentlemen" and one a workman, the former were allowed bail, but not the latter, and, when the Defence Association stepped in, bail was fixed at the absurd amount of £400. To round the story off it is only necessary to mention that the charge was later withdrawn for lack of evidence.

Thus began the Trafalgar Square episode. A meeting had been called in the Square, and, notwithstanding an assurance in the House that *bona fide* political meetings would be left in peace, Sir Charles Warren prohibited it on the evening before the date fixed. It was accordingly decided to go to the Square as a formal protest. On the day processions were formed and made their way in the direction of the meeting. Before they got there the processions were set upon by mounted police armed with truncheons. Mr Cunninghame Grahame and Mr John Burns, the heroes of the day, were knocked about and arrested, several men were killed, and

SOCIALISM

many injured. Mrs Besant then did much valuable work in organizing defence funds, paying fines, and the like. Bradlaugh commented generously, if somewhat pontifically, "While I should not have marked out this as fitting woman's work, especially in the recent very inclement weather, I desire to record my view that it has been bravely done, well done, and most usefully done, and I wish to mark this the more emphatically as my views and those of Mrs Besant seem wider apart than I could have deemed possible on many of the points of principle underlying what is every day growing into a most serious struggle."

XVI

TRADE UNIONISM

BRADLAUGH's grave disapproval could not keep Mrs Besant from becoming more and more devoted to social service. She even gave up *Our Corner* and started in its place, with W. T. Stead, a halfpenny weekly called *The Link*, in which Socialism was outspokenly advocated.

Unfortunately it ran only until the end of the year, but during its short life it did much good, pointing out injustice, underpayment, oppression, starvation. This activity led directly to Mrs Besant's "cleaning-up" of Messrs Bryant and May's factory. This well-known firm of match manufacturers were paying very large dividends, the £5 shares changing hands at over £18. Yet their workpeople, mostly girls, were grossly underpaid, with the brutalizing effects which can be guessed from the photograph reproduced facing p. 126. These girls thought themselves lucky if they earned as much as 8s. or 9s. a week.

Mrs Besant published the facts and was threatened with an action for libel. This came to nothing, for the firm found a better way, making the girls sign statements that they were contented and that Mrs Besant's allegations were untrue. They refused,

TRADE UNIONISM

were threatened with dismissal, still stood firm, and, when one girl was actually dismissed the whole 1400 of them came out on strike. Mrs Besant and Herbert Burrows took up their cause and eventually won the day for them, forming the Matchmakers' Union, of which they became the officials. "As a result of that fight," said John Scurr many years after, "that factory is now one of the model factories; every person employed there is a Trade Unionist, and as far as it is possible in present conditions to solve the unemployment problem, they have solved it for their own industry. That all sprang from the work Annie Besant started down there."

Mrs Besant did much work of that kind, into which it is impossible to enter in detail. In her own words, there "came a cry for help from South London, from tin-box makers, illegally fined, in many cases grievously mutilated by the non-fencing of machinery; then aid to shop assistants, also illegally fined; legal defences by the score still continued; a vigorous agitation for a free meal for children, and for fair wages to be paid by all public bodies; work for the dockers and exposure of their wrongs; a visit to the Cradley Heath chain-makers, speeches to them, writing for them; a contest for the School Board for the Tower Hamlets division, and triumphant return at the head of the poll." In addition she took vigorous part in the organization of the South London fur-pullers, and in the movement for shortening the hours of omnibus and tramway men.

MRS ANNIE BESANT

But perhaps her most important piece of work in this field was done on the London School Board. After bitter abuse she was elected for the Tower Hamlets' division in November 1888, heading the poll by nearly 3000 votes. At her very first meeting Mrs Besant supported a resolution that the Board's contract should be made subject to the payment of Trade Union rates. The resolution was carried, and according to Mr Lansbury, its effect "was electric throughout the world of Labour. Everywhere an agitation was set on foot to secure that all Government and municipal contracts should contain such a clause, and although we have not secured all we hoped for, yet the great municipalities and the Government have all adopted the resolution in such a form as ensures that whether there is a Trade Union or no a standard rate of pay and hours of labour shall prevail."

All this came to an end when Mrs Besant joined the Theosophical Society. She gave up her active Socialist work, and though she continued to remain a sort of theoretical Socialist, she soon applied the hierarchical theory of the universe to Society in such a way as to make true Socialism impossible for her. If we may anticipate a long way there is one later incident in Mrs Besant's life which is worthy of record in this connection. This was in 1914 in connection with the erection of the proposed new headquarters of the Theosophical Society in England. The contractors, Messrs Cubitt, in common with other members of the trade, had locked out their



MRS BESANT AND THE STRING COMMITTEE OF THE MATCHMAKERS' UNION IN 1888

TRADE UNIONISM

workmen. At this time Annie Besant arrived in England and found all building operations suspended, with all the loss of time and money this involved. She made a proposal to the London Building Trades Federation that they should supply her direct with Trade Union men, and proceed with the work. They agreed to this, and an agreement to this effect was signed. Now, however, the contractors demanded the return of their scaffolding, a very serious matter. This was immediately agreed to, and new scaffolding was purchased so promptly that the building ring's "corner" in building materials was anticipated. A further attempt to prevent the supply of materials bought was defeated by a margin of only two hours. The old scaffolding came down in three days instead of the usual fortnight, and the new went up with equal speed. On her departure from London Annie Besant was presented with the following address at a farewell meeting:

"Madam,

"It is my pleasure to welcome you on behalf of the Staff now working on the Theosophical Building on your visit to us to-day, and to ask you to accept this small token from us as a mark of the appreciation that we feel towards you in the very splendid work you have started in the Building Trade. Some of us present to-day remember the splendidly unselfish work you have done in the past, and your untiring energy in the uplifting of the working classes, and we know and feel that in your work of the present

MRS ANNIE BESANT

time you have the best interests of all classes at heart.

“We are all members of brotherhoods and Trade Unions, and we have shown what determination and holding together will do in the struggle that is now going on and which is now in the 23rd week, a struggle that has cost us, our wives and children many hardships and privations, but we know that our cause is just, and know that Brotherhood and Co-operation will finally overcome all difficulties. We thank you for coming amongst us as you have done to-day, and especially for breaking the bonds of convention as you have done by the employment of direct labor, and have thus made it possible for us to earn our living, and you may rest assured that the work you have given to us—against great opposition—will be well done, and so we wish you God-speed and a safe ending to the journey you start on to-night, and we hope to again welcome you on your return to England. May success attend you in whatever you may put your hand to.”

XVII

FAITH RECAPTURED

HER first awareness of Theosophy came to Mrs Besant in 1882, as can be seen from her editorial writings. Coming across a statement of the Theosophical Society's principles, she wrote that it conveyed "no very definite idea of the requirements for membership, beyond a dreamy, emotional, scholarly interest in the religio-philosophic fancies of the past." An address by Colonel Olcott led her to suppose that the Theosophical Society held to "some strange theory of 'apparitions' of the dead, and to some existence outside the physical and apart from it." She added that there is "a radical difference between the mysticism of Theosophy and the scientific materialism of Secularism. The exclusive devotion to this world implied in the profession of Secularism leaves no room for other-worldism; and consistent members of our body cannot join a society which professes belief therein."

From time to time Mme Blavatsky, in her own organs, commented on the doings of Mrs Besant. In the same month, June 1882, in which Mrs Besant wrote the article from which I have quoted, Mme Blavatsky wrote in *The Theosophist*, with the good sense and good feeling she often showed when not

MRS ANNIE BESANT

occupied in "ladling out flapdoodle," to use her own expression. She wrote that "Another lady orator, of deservedly great fame, both for eloquence and learning—the good Mrs Annie Besant—without believing in controlling spirits, or for that matter in her own spirit, yet speaks and writes such sensible and wise things, that we might almost say that one of her speeches or chapters contain more matter to benefit humanity than would equip a modern trance-speaker for an entire oratorical career."

It is impossible to understand subsequent developments unless we indulge in a little speculation, so far as the evidence justifies it. Mrs Besant (we may remember her mother's dying words) was always above all else pre-occupied with religion. She had the ardent, emotional, romantic temperament which, if also religious, seems inevitably to gravitate to the Roman Catholic Church, or at least to the "highest" forms of the Church of England. Nor were there contemporary observers wanting, Mr Shaw tells us, who prophesied, even at the height of her Atheistic career, that Rome would eventually be her spiritual resting-place.

We have seen how susceptible she was to the religious influences of music, flowers, incense, the chanted prayers, and the dim atmosphere of Roman churches. Could such a temperament, in which mind was always subject to feeling, find a permanent home in the dull, level atmosphere of nineteenth-century Freethought? Could the Hall of Science

FAITH RECAPTURED

be an adequate substitute for the "solemn beauty of Notre Dame, the somewhat gaudy magnificence of La Sainte Chapelle, the stateliness of La Madeleine, the impressive gloom of St Roch?" Could Mr Bradlaugh, hero and good friend though he was, replace the Prince of Heaven? The constant round of lecturing in dreary halls to stupid if hero-worshipping audiences, the endless dismal agitations, the lack, apart from Bradlaugh and a few others, of cultured companionship, and the total absence of love, beauty, art, music—could she tolerate these indefinitely?

Mrs Besant undoubtedly tolerated them willingly for five or six years. But with the opening of the 'eighties we perceive a slightly but increasingly forced note in her writings and activities. We have seen how she threw herself into one thing after another, science, *Our Corner*, Socialism, local government, and the rest. Can she have been trying, consciously or unconsciously, to find some relief from the dull atheistic round? It is also interesting to note that in 1885 Mrs Besant published her *Autobiographical Sketches*; can this have been the result of some awareness of the approaching end of an epoch in her life?

One thing is certain: by the middle 'eighties one might have thought that her attitude to Christianity would have been mellowed by a busy decade of active Freethought. And, in fact, between 1879 and 1885, Mrs Besant had done a great deal of constructive work and had published practically nothing of a

MRS ANNIE BESANT

purely destructive anti-religious kind. Now, suddenly, she produced a long series of attacks of quite unexampled bitterness. In 1885 we have *Is Christianity a Success?*, *The Natural History of the Christian Devil*, *Woman's Position according to the Bible*, *A World without God*. In 1886 Mrs Besant delivered a series of sound and admirable, but very energetically expressed lectures on "Threatenings and slaughters" and "For the Crown and against the Nation," lectures which she published in book-form under the title of *The Sins of the Church*; two supplementary pamphlets were called *A Burden on Labour* and *A Creature of Crown and Parliament*. The same year saw also the publication of *Life, Death, and Immortality*, *The Myth of the Resurrection*, and *The World and its Gods*. In 1887 appeared *Why I do not believe in God*.

What was the meaning of this sudden outburst? Had Mrs Besant tried to revive her drooping scepticism by a course of reading on the iniquities of the Church? Had she thus hoped to regain once more that first, fine rapture of dissent? If so, she was not successful. Not only is the note of the later publications very different from the obviously sincere indignation of the early ones, but she failed in her object. In my *Bibliography of Annie Besant*, published in 1924, there are recorded books and pamphlets from her pen for every year from 1873 up to the date of publication, with one exception, 1888. The last publication of 1887, the silence of 1888, and the first publication of 1889, present the following

FAITH RECAPTURED

dramatic juxtaposition, which I abridge from the bibliography:

1887. WHY I DO NOT BELIEVE IN GOD. By Annie Besant.

1888.

1889. WHY I BECAME A THEOSOPHIST. By Annie Besant (Fellow of the Theosophical Society).

What had happened? I have suggested what I regard as the true explanation. Let us now consider the outward trend of events. In February of the critical year 1888, we find Mrs Besant writing in *Our Corner*: "Lately there has been dawning on the minds of men far apart in questions of theology, the idea of founding a new Brotherhood, in which service of Man should take the place erstwhile given to service of God—a brotherhood in which work should be worship and love should be baptism, in which none should be regarded as alien who was willing to work for human good. One day as I was walking towards Millbank Gaol with the Rev. S. D. Headlam, on the way to liberate a prisoner, I said to him: 'Mr Headlam, we ought to have a new Church, which should include all who have the common ground of faith in and love for man.' And a little later I found that my friend Mr W. T. Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, had long been brooding over a similar thought, and wondering whether men 'might not be persuaded to be as earnest about making this world happy as they are

MRS ANNIE BESANT

over saving their souls.' The teaching of social duty, the upholding of social righteousness, the building up of a true commonwealth—such would be among the aims of the Church of the future. Is the hope too fair for realization? Is the winning of such beatific vision yet once more the dream of the enthusiast? But surely the one fact that persons so deeply differing in theological creeds as those who have been toiling for the last three months to aid and relieve the oppressed, can work in absolute harmony side by side for the one end—surely this proves that there is a bond which is stronger than our antagonisms, a unity which is deeper than the speculative theories which divide."

It seems that Mrs Besant's mind was playing round the idea of some new comprehensive organization which should include all faiths, an idea to which she was to return again and again in later life. Did she perhaps remember the childish dreams in which she saw herself the leader of a new dispensation? For some time she hoped to find the goal in Socialism, but fortunately the satirical matter-of-factness of the Fabians dispelled that dream.

Thus, writes Mrs Besant, "was ushered in 1889, the to me never-to-be-forgotten year in which I found my way 'Home' and had the priceless good fortune of meeting, and of becoming the pupil of, H. P. Blavatsky. Ever more and more had been growing on me the feeling that something more than I had was needed for the cure of social ills. The Socialist position sufficed on the economic side,

FAITH RECAPTURED

but where to gain the inspiration, the motive, which should lead to the realization of the Brotherhood of Man? Our efforts to really organize bands of unselfish workers had failed. Much indeed had been done, but there was not a real movement of self-sacrificing devotion, in which men worked for Love's sake only, and asked but to give, not to take. Where was the material for the nobler Social Order, where the hewn stones for the building of the Temple of Man? A great despair would oppress me as I sought for such a movement and found it not.

“Not only so; but since 1886 there had been slowly growing up a conviction that my philosophy was not sufficient; that life and mind were other than, more than, I had dreamed. Psychology was advancing with rapid strides; hypnotic experiments were revealing unlooked-for complexities in human consciousness, strange riddles of multiplex personalities, and, most startling of all, vivid intensities of mental action when the brain, that should be the generator of thought, was reduced to a comatose state. Fact after fact came hurtling in upon me, demanding the explanation I was incompetent to give. I studied the obscurer sides of consciousness, dreams, hallucinations, illusions, insanity. Into the darkness shot a ray of light—A. P. Sinnett's ‘Occult World,’ with its wonderfully suggestive letters, expounding not the supernatural but a nature under law, wider than I had dared to conceive. I added Spiritualism to my studies, experimenting privately, finding the phenomena indubitable, but the spiritualistic explana-

MRS ANNIE BESANT

tion of them incredible. The phenomena of clairvoyance, clairaudience, thought-reading, were found to be real. Under all the rush of the outer life, already sketched, these questions were working in my mind, their answers were being diligently sought. I read a variety of books, but could find little in them that satisfied me. I experimented in various ways suggested in them, and got some (to me) curious results. I finally convinced myself that there was some hidden thing, some hidden power, and resolved to seek until I found, and by the early spring of 1889 I had grown desperately determined to find at all hazards what I sought. At last, sitting alone in deep thought as I had become accustomed to do after the sun had set, filled with an intense but nearly hopeless longing to solve the riddle of life and mind, I heard a Voice that was later to become to me the holiest sound on earth, bidding me take courage for the light was near. A fortnight passed, and then Mr Stead gave into my hands two large volumes. 'Can you review these? My young men all fight shy of them, but you are quite mad enough on these subjects to make something of them.' I took the books; they were the two volumes of *The Secret Doctrine*, written by H. P. Blavatsky."

XVIII

THE SECRET DOCTRINE

WHAT is this book to which Mrs Besant attributed so marvellous an influence on her life? As originally published in 1888 *The Secret Doctrine: the Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy* is a work in two volumes, respectively entitled "Cosmogogenesis" and "Anthropogenesis." It extends to 1567 pages and contains some 650,000 words; it would, indeed, have been twice as long had not the author's death prevented the publication of the remaining two volumes announced in the Preface (though Mrs Besant made up a third volume in 1897 out of papers left by Mme Blavatsky).

The Secret Doctrine is often obscure to impenetrability, it is badly and ungrammatically written, the phrases cited in classical and oriental languages are frequently wrong, errors of fact occur on almost every page. These things, however, we need not allow to disturb us. English was not Mme Blavatsky's native language, and a wandering life does not favour the production of a work of exact scholarship. In addition to these faults *The Secret Doctrine* contains a very large number of unacknowledged extracts, often lengthy, taken from a considerable number of works, many of them themselves worthless. This

MRS ANNIE BESANT

circumstance, difficult to pardon in an ordinary writer, may also be forgiven to Mme Blavatsky; for we have to remember that she wrote the book in a sort of clairvoyant ecstasy and consequently, we are told, it is only natural that she should sometimes have been unable to distinguish between a page open before her in all reality and one clairvoyantly inscribed on the tablets of her memory. Let us leave these petty details, conscious that they are unworthy of serious consideration when we are confronted with a "synthesis of science, religion, and philosophy." Let us proceed to a consideration of the book itself.

From the Introduction we learn that there exists an immense esoteric literature wholly unknown to the philologist. "Along the ridge of Altyn-Toga, whose soil no European foot has ever trodden so far, there exists a certain hamlet, lost in a deep gorge. It is a small cluster of houses, a hamlet rather than a monastery, with a poor-looking temple in it with one old lama, a hermit, living nearby to watch it. Pilgrims say that the subterranean galleries and halls under it contain a collection of books, the number of which, according to the accounts given, is too large to find room even in the British Museum." The British Museum Library, it may be interjected, occupies some fifty miles of shelving.

It is on one of these unknown books, called by Mme Blavatsky "The Secret Book of Dzryan," that *The Secret Doctrine* is based: "An Archaic Manuscript—a collection of palm leaves made impermeable

THE SECRET DOCTRINE

to water, fire, and air, by some specific unknown process is before the writer's eye. On the first page is an immaculate white disk within a dull black ground. On the following page, the same disk, but with a central point." These symbols are explained at some length, the "Book" is summarized, and a translation of selected portions is then given. Only a "modern translated version" is printed, for the original would not be understood, since it is full of untranslatable terms. Thus, writes Mme Blavatsky, "were one to translate into English, using only the substantives and technical terms as employed in one of the Tibetan and Senzar versions, Verse I would read as follows: 'Tho-ag in Zhi-gyu slept seven Khorlo. Zodmanas Zhiba. All Nyug bosom. Konch-hog not; Thyan-Kam not; Lha-Chohan not; Tenbrel Chugnyi not; Dharmakaya ceased; Tgenchang not become; Barnang and Ssa in Ngovon-yidj; alone Tho-og Yinsin in night of Sun-chan and Yong-grub (Parinish-panna), etc., etc.,' which would sound like pure Abracadabra."

Thus, to save us from Abracadabra, Mme Blavatsky has given us a translation of parts of the "Book of Dzyan," on which the first 300 pages of *The Secret Doctrine* are a direct commentary and the rest of the book an indirect one. I quote the first stanza:

"1. The eternal parent wrapped in her ever invisible robes had slumbered once again for seven eternities.

MRS ANNIE BESANT

2. Time was not, for it lay asleep in the infinite bosom of duration.

3. Universal mind was not, for there were no Ah-hi to contain it.

4. The seven ways to bliss were not. The great causes of misery were not, for there was no one to produce and get ensnared by them.

5. Darkness alone filled the boundless all, for father, mother, and son were once more one, and the son had not awakened yet for the new wheel, and his pilgrimage thereon.

6. The seven sublime lords and the seven truths had ceased to be, and the Universe, the son of Necessity, was immersed in Paranishpanna, to be outbreathed by that which is and yet is not. Naught was.

7. The causes of existence had been done away with; the visible that was, and the invisible that is, rested in eternal non-being—the one being.

8. Alone the one form of existence stretched boundless, infinite, causeless, in dreamless sleep; and life pulsed unconscious in universal space, throughout that all-presence which is served by the opened eye of Dangma.

9. But where was the Dangma when the Alaya of the Universe was in Paramartha and the great wheel of Anupadaka?"

Such is part of the basis of *The Secret Doctrine*. As already mentioned, these lines are pregnant with meaning to such an extent that they require 1500 pages for their elucidation, an elucidation, moreover,

THE SECRET DOCTRINE

so obscure, that many thousands of pages have been written to elucidate it in *its* turn. The reader will therefore not expect anything like a summary of the book. The doctrines put forward in it, as put into a show of order and made internally consistent by Mrs Besant will be described in a later section. Here I will merely set out a few passages from *The Secret Doctrine*, but not at random, lest I be suspected of biased selection. I will reproduce the first quotable passage on several pages in a fixed series hit upon at random.

From page 101 of the first volume: "There is a whole poem on the pregenetic battles fought by the growing planets before the final formation of Kosmos, thus accounting for the seemingly disturbed position of the systems of several planets . . ."

From page 201: "In the 'beginning,' that which is called in mystic phraseology '*Cosmic Desire*' evolves into absolute light. Now light without any shadow would be absolute light—in other words, absolute darkness—as physical science seeks to prove."

From page 101 of the second volume: "The 'function' of divine Pramanthâ and Arani could suggest itself under this image [*i.e.* as a 'physiological' symbol] only to the brutal conceptions of the German materialists—than whom there are none worse."

From page 201: "In these red-haired and hair-covered monsters, the fruit of the unnatural connection between men and animals, the 'Lords of Wisdom' did not incarnate, as we see."

MRS ANNIE BESANT

This was the book by which the woman who had arrived at Freethought by "cold reason," was dazzled and blinded, in this she saw the light, in this she found "the very Truth." Mrs Besant wrote her review and went to see Mme Blavatsky, who, "with a yearning throb in the voice" asked Mrs Besant to join her. "I felt a well-nigh uncontrollable desire to bend down and kiss her, under the compulsion of that yearning voice, those compelling eyes, but with a flash of the old unbending pride and an inward jeer at my own folly, I said a commonplace polite good-bye, and turned away with some inanely courteous and evasive remark. 'Child,' she said to me long afterwards, 'your pride is terrible; you are as proud as Lucifer himself.' But truly I think I never showed it to her again after that first evening, though it sprang up wrathfully in her defence many and many a time, until I learned the pettiness and the worthlessness of all criticism, and knew that the blind were objects of compassion not of scorn."

Who and what was this remarkable creature who had changed Mrs Besant so utterly in a flash?

XIX

H.P.B.

HELENA PETROVNA HAHN was born on 31 July 1831 in the Ukraine, in a family of the lower nobility. From her childhood she is said to have been "psychic" and "mystical." She had the usual governesses and the usual childhood escapades, over which we need not linger. At the age of thirteen her father took her to Paris and London, where she cultivated her musical talents. On her return home, she was married, at the age of seventeen, to a General Blavatsky. In Mme Blavatsky's vivacious and only moderately exaggerated words, addressed in 1874 to an American journalist: "When I was sixteen years of age they married me to M. Blavatsky. He was the Governor of Erivan. Fancy! He was seventy-three [he was in fact thirty years younger] and I was sixteen. But mind, I don't blame anybody—not my friends, not in the least. However, at the end of the year we separated. His habits were not agreeable to me."

The next twenty-five years of Mme Blavatsky's life are obscure. Wholly definite information is largely lacking, though there are many statements from Mme Blavatsky herself. Unfortunately these statements are almost as various as they are numerous

MRS ANNIE BESANT

for it was during these years that she alleged her occult experiences and initiations to have taken place, and, if these did not take place, it was clearly imperative for her to hide the truth. The following highly condensed account may be taken as a sort of average of Mme Blavatsky's autobiographical fragments.¹

When Mme Blavatsky left her husband she made her way to Constantinople, where she met the Countess Kisselev, with whom she travelled in Egypt, Greece, and the Balkans, beginning at the same time her occult studies. She went on to Paris and London, where, in Hyde Park, she met a mysterious Oriental messenger, who informed her that she had been chosen as their envoy to mankind by the Mahatmas of the Himalayas. From this moment, Mme Blavatsky declared, her every action was dictated by these rulers of the world. From London Mme Blavatsky went to America, where she visited Canada, the United States, and Mexico, absorbing Indian magical lore. Thence she proceeded to India, accompanied by an Englishman and a Hindu, with the intention of visiting the Masters. Prevented by the authorities from entering Nepal, Mme Blavatsky returned to Southern India, and thence back to England by way of Java and Singapore.

The year 1853 found her again in America, where she remained for as long as two years before returning to India to make another attempt to enter Tibet. This time she was successful and enjoyed many

¹ Besides Mme Blavatsky's own writings and other original sources, I have frequently consulted Mr C. E. Bechhofer Roberts's excellent and impartial life of H. P. B., *The Mysterious Madame* (1931).

marvellous experiences. In 1858 she was again travelling in Europe, and even paid a visit to her home in Russia. By now she was a finished occultist, able herself to produce the most convincing magical and spiritualistic phenomena. After two years in Russia (there is independent evidence that she was actually in Tiflis in 1860), Mme Blavatsky resumed her travels by journeying on horseback through the Caucasus. After a three days' reconciliation with her husband (who, by her account, must now have been ninety), she then travelled in the Balkans and Italy, fighting in the dress of a man under Garibaldi, returned to the East and now at last came into the presence of the Masters. With them she remained for a period ranging in her accounts from three to ten years. After this supreme experience Mme Blavatsky returned to Europe, travelled in Greece and Italy, and then settled for a time in Cairo. Here she founded a spiritualistic Society and herself practised as a medium, facts for which there exists independent, if highly unflattering, evidence. For the next two years she travelled about Europe, after which her Master ordered her to New York, where she arrived in the summer of 1873, to found the Theosophical Society. In Mr Roberts's words, "Such is H.P.B.'s story of her early years. What a pity that scarcely a word of it is true!"

The truth is something like this, so far as it can be ascertained. On leaving her husband, a man in the prime of life, she ran away to Constantinople in the company of an English sea-captain. In Constan-

MRS ANNIE BESANT

tinople she became a bareback-rider in a circus and then "married" an opera-singer, with whom she travelled extensively. Leaving him she "married" an English business man, whom she accompanied to America. Later, in Europe, she acted as a medium and was musically occupied in some way. After her return to Russia she took up again with the opera-singer, went into business, returned to Egypt with her operative "husband," was shipwrecked, and so arrived penniless in Egypt.

Of these two versions, the first rests on Mme Blavatsky's sole, often self-contradictory, and almost totally uncorroborated assertions. At nearly every point on which it can be verified it is found to be untrue. The second version rests on scanty evidence, it is true, mainly the statements of members of her family, but is undoubtedly accurate so far as it can be verified. The question need not be pursued in greater detail; we may only consider one thing: if Mme Blavatsky's own version is the true one, how did she finance all these expensive journeys and support herself for so many years?

From 1873 onwards, however, Mme Blavatsky's career is public property. On her arrival in America she gave no indication of having a mission of any sort to fulfill. With a small legacy from her father she entered into partnership in a farm, but soon quarrelled with her partner. This episode, at the outset of what one may call her public and verifiable career, as distinct from her previous private and almost unverifiable life, presents a useful test of Mme

Blavatsky's veracity. This matter of the farm and the dispute with her partner, in which a trifling sum of a few hundred dollars was involved, was afterwards magnified by her into a picturesque incident involving a legacy of 80,000 roubles, the purchase with this money of an estate, and the loss of the deeds together with all memory of the location of the estate.

Now Mme Blavatsky took the decisive step of her career. Spiritualism was again arousing interest in America, mainly on account of the phenomena produced by the Eddy brothers on a farm at Chittenden, in Vermont. Having read some articles on these phenomena by one Colonel Henry Steele Olcott, Mme Blavatsky went to Chittenden and met the Colonel, from whom she was henceforth to be inseparable. At once the phenomena at Chittenden (which, by the way, were undoubtedly fraudulent from beginning to end) became more and more remarkable, owing to her own immense psychic powers. Olcott was vastly impressed, hailed her as a master of occult wisdom, entered into a sort of spiritual partnership with her, and founded a "Miracle Club."

"John King," a spirit control who had already appeared through various mediums of dubious reputation, now helped and inspired her. Soon came the first hint of what the future held in store: "I am now writing," said Mme Blavatsky, "a big book, which I will call, on John's advice, *Skeleton Keys to Mysterious Gates*." But soon Mme Blavatsky

MRS ANNIE BESANT

transmogrified John King into a Himalayan Master, a conception which thus made its first appearance in her life, notwithstanding such alleged episodes as the famous Hyde Park encounter. The notion of the White Brotherhood in Tibet was, however, still unborn; at this time Mme Blavatsky still spoke only of a "Committee of Seven, Brotherhood of Luxor." All this duly impressed Colonel Olcott, as did, needless to say, the astounding miracles she managed to perform. Some idea of these may be gleaned from the following extracts taken from a hitherto unpublished letter in the archives of the Society for Psychical Research, written by Olcott to C. C. Massey and the Rev. W. Stainton Moses:

"I say her, because it is a habit, but dear lord! boys, in my opinion she is not more a *she* than you or I. Putting aside her actions, habits of thought, masculine ways, her constant asseverations of the fact (which while made to third parties in *badinage*, nevertheless are deeply significant to one who has learnt to read her sub-cutaneously)—putting these aside, I have pumped enough out of her to satisfy me that the theory long since communicated by me to you was correct—she is a man, a very old man, and a most learned and wonderful man. Of course *she* knows just what my impressions are for she reads my thoughts like a printed page (and others' thoughts) and it seems to me *she* is not dissatisfied, for our relations have insensibly merged into those of Master and pupil. There is not a trace left of the old *sabreur* Blavatsky ('Jack' as I nicknamed her to her great

delight) so far as I am concerned. Now she is all sobriety, dignity, stern self-repression. Before others she is as of old, but the moment their backs are turned she is *Mejnour* and I the neophyte, for one never wearies of rendering respectful homage, to sage dignity and learning when joined in one's teacher.¹

"Judge (my only fellow-neophyte here) said to me at the office to-day after a morning-call at the house, 'How totally she is changed! Formerly she used to be so jolly and extravagant in speech: Now she is as sober as a Deacon!' I must tell you a good joke—my married sister, a staunch Presbyterian and the mother of six children—one who never was a spiritualist or heterodox in any way, has become so delighted with Isis, that she spends always one day in the week and sometimes more with her. I tell her that I would wager \$500 that Isis and I could make her a full-fledged Buddhist [*sic*] inside of six months if I chose to try. She laughs.

"I say Isis is a man. Let me add that *she* is (in my opinion) a Hindu man. At any rate, this thing happened to-night after my sister and her husband had gone home: Isis was leaning back in her chair, fooling with her hair, and smoking a cigarette. She got one lock in her fingers and pulled it, and fingered it in an absent way—talking the while, when lo! the lock grew visibly darker and darker until, presto!

¹ [The second part of this sentence was crossed out apparently at
~~some point in the original~~

MRS ANNIE BESANT

it was as black as coal. I said nothing until the thing was done, when suddenly catching her hand I asked her to let me have this neat specimen of miracle-making as a keepsake. You ought to have seen her face when she saw what she had done in her brown study. But she laughed good-naturedly, called me a sharp Yankee, and cut off the lock and gave it to me. Stay—I will send you a bit of it as a talisman for Oxon [the Rev. W. Stainton Moses] and you. Mind you, this was cut off of Isis' head in my sight and under the full blaze of the chandelier. This one lock showed against the blonde silky and crinkled hair of Blavatsky's head like a skein of black sewing-silk upon a light-brown cloth. Now what this teaches me is just this—The Blavatsky shell is a shell, tenanted by a copper-coloured Hindu Solon or Pythagoras, and in this moment of abstraction his own hair—previously there only in its astral condition, as a part of the *scin-lecca*, became materialized and now stays so. Mind you these are my private speculations, but believe me they are just about as near the truth as one can come.

“I saw another instance of this materialization on Thursday night. We were talking about Hindu costume etc.’ and ^{she} _{he} (I will continue to say *she* as more convenient) told me that she wore a wrapper about the house there, that was delightfully cool. ‘See,’ she said, ‘I will show you, for *I always wear it wherever I go*’; and with the words, she lifted her left hand, and there was a large sleeve of lavender-

colored silken-tissue projecting from the tight sleeve of her merino wrapper. I felt it and inspected it closely. It was as thin as gossamer—a Chinese tissue—and presented the appearance of having been washed. She made a pass or two over it, and it was gone again. This again proves to my mind the fact that the adept who lives a foreign life in another body, is there *totis partibus* in his astral form—with the double of every part and portion of his own costume, and that in an instant (provided that he has the requisite knowledge) he can make any part or the whole of himself and his coverings objective.

“Why, I can’t tell you the number and variety of exhibitions of magical power she has given me and others during the past four months. They exceed all I had seen before. She has done her wonders before 4, 6, and 8 persons, some of them comparative strangers. On Monday night, in the presence of Dr Billing, Dr Marquette, Mr and Miss Monachesi, Mr Curtis (a *World* reporter) and myself—these things happened in full light: she made the music of a musical-box to be heard in the air. At first faint and far, far away, it grew louder and louder until it sounded as if the box were floating around the room and playing at full force. Then it died away again, again approached, and then suddenly ceased. She carelessly put out her hand, and withdrawing it showed us a long string of those perfumed Oriental beads, whose fragrance filled the room. Holding them in one hand, she asked me if I wanted

MRS ANNIE BESANT

some, and at once pulled *duplicates* off, one by one, until she had given me 27. I strung them and after handling them awhile laid them on my writing-table (beyond her reach a good way) for a moment while I filled a pipe and upon taking them up again, there was a Turkish coin strung on the string with them! Still holding her own original necklace she pulled off (materialized) a bead mounted in gold as a scarf-pin, and upon our drawing lots Monachesi got it and has it now. The four of the party happening to sit so they could look out of the window into the street (a room in second story of house), saw pass the window *on the outside* the forms of two men. *One of them was a Brother I know well*, and whose portrait was materialized instantly for me some months ago. The other was a younger Brother—an advanced pupil who can travel in his double.

“O’Sullivan (J. L.) has been here *en route* to Paris, and made ‘Mme’s’ acquaintance and even stayed all night once with us. In his presence she materialized, on two different occasions, handkerchiefs of a beautifully fine and delicate Chinese silk crape with a satin striped border. In the corner, marked in ink, *was the name of a certain Brother* in the Ancient Zenzar character. I was present, both times. I wish you might have seen O’Sullivan’s consternation: he jumped for the hdkfs like a trout at a fly, and carried one off as a trophy. If you meet him get him to show it to you and tell the story: he’s imparting it to everybody here. The original handkerchief was materialized two weeks ago Sunday

in the presence of a French artist named Haruisse. We three were talking of the delicate fabrics of the Chinese, and Haruisse said that their crapes were much finer than those of Lyons. 'Did you ever see their handkerchiefs, Madame?' he asked. 'Oh! yes—see, here is one!' she replied, quietly grabbing the very article out of the *Astral Wardrobe!* This specimen I retained for myself, chiefly because it was strongly impregnated with the Lodge perfume that is so delicious to me. A few days later she made the first duplicate in O'S's presence, and the second the next evening. A fourth copy she made for my sister, who is so afraid it will take wings to itself that she goes and looks in the box where she keeps it, two or three times a day!

"But the greatest job of materialization was that of a lot of money—enough to furnish the whole 'flat' in excellent style, buy herself a new piano, a fur-lined silk cloak, and all sorts of things—in short, at least \$2000. This also came out of the *Astral Bank for Savings*. She has doubled money for me at different times—latterly to the extent of several hundred dollars. Don't start: there is no immorality in the affair—no ground for charge of counterfeiting. When doubling is merely done for the purpose of instruction (as when she made a \$500 bill in O'S's presence, the other day) the duplicates do not remain; they disappear as mysteriously as they came; but when otherwise then she merely rematerializes bills or specie that have been burnt or lost inevitably (by ordinary methods) in some other

MRS ANNIE BESANT

way. This is my theory anyhow: neophytes have to hatch their own broods of chickens. There was a necessity for certain changes in the apartments just now, in view of the large number of visitors who were to come, and the means were forthcoming to make them. The rooms now look charming. (Why the devil don't you send your picture, you father of all the mules, for stubbornness?)—Apropos of portraits, I have in my room over my bed the portraits of *four* Brothers. One I have had photographed on purpose to send you boys copies and get your impressions about him. This is one of the most wise and powerful of them. Tell me what you both think upon seeing it.

“I saw a splendid exhibition of will-power recently. Isis and I were alone after dinner, in the parlor, when she bade me turn the gas very low and sit quiet at the other side of the room. I made the light very dim, and upon looking at her through the gloom in a few minutes I saw beside her dark figure (she was dressed in a dark gown) *a man's figure in white*, or light robes, and with a shawl wound in Eastern fashion about his head. She told me to look away for a moment, and then to turn up the gas. *She sat there with the very shawl transferred to her own head*, and no one else visible but us two. She gave me the shawl. It was powerfully perfumed with the familiar odor. *In one corner was worked the name of the same Brother above alluded to, and in the same Zenzar character.* It is on his portrait, in my bedroom.”

The need of a Society of some kind to replace the Miracle Club, which had promptly collapsed, was soon realized, and after much discussion the Theosophical Society was formed in 1875, Mme Blavatsky's third attempt at some organization to provide her with the backing she needed. Unfortunately the Society did not prosper. The promised miracles did not materialize, members left, and even within the first few weeks there was an outburst of the dissensions from which the Society has never been free from that day to this. Now Mme Blavatsky had the good fortune to meet a young man, M. C. Bettanelly, whom she believed to be rich, and with whom she in due course, in police-court language, yet again went through a form of marriage. Unfortunately the young man turned out not to be rich and in a few months Mme Blavatsky left him and was divorced. In after years she ascribed the episode to the operation of Black Magicians.

Mme Blavatsky now realized that there was nothing for it but to provide her followers, if she were not to lose them and their indispensable support, some solid fare to digest. Accordingly she set to and in 1877 appeared a work in two volumes entitled *Isis Unveiled*. But this work, though it created a somewhat ambiguous sensation, was not a financial success. There was nothing for it but once more to try other climes, and, having become a naturalized American, Mme Blavatsky, in 1878, accompanied by the faithful Colonel, left for India.

The rest of the story can be told briefly. The

MRS ANNIE BESANT

Colonel provided considerable organizing skill, Mme Blavatsky supplied marvels of all kinds, both flattered the Indians and their faiths in the most fulsome manner, and gradually the membership of the Theosophical Society increased, and with it its financial resources. At last Mme Blavatsky had found a sure haven, and all would have been well but for one most unfortunate event. In 1882 was founded the Society for Psychical Research, the object of which was to investigate all kinds of alleged supernormal phenomena on purely scientific lines. In pursuance of this aim the Society turned its attention to Mme Blavatsky. A preliminary cross-examination of Mme Blavatsky, Colonel Olcott, and others, produced a provisionally favourable impression, the Society for Psychical Research not having at that time fully plumbed the depths of human frailty and deceit in the field of the occult. Accordingly Dr Hodgson was sent to India to investigate matters on the spot. At first decidedly inclined to believe, and by no means a sceptic, as is shown by his later career, he soon realized that the whole structure of "phenomena," as these very special phenomena were called, was based on fraud. His report to that effect, though, like all the S.P.R.'s publications, merely a personal one, leaves no room for doubt on this point. Hodgson not only exposed the rationale of the fraud, but also its mechanism. Nevertheless Mme Blavatsky retained a large following, and merely changed the scene of her activities to England, renounced "phenomena," and pub-

lished *The Secret Doctrine*, the book which converted Mrs Besant to Theosophy.

As I have tried to show elsewhere¹ there is material of interest and value in Mme Blavatsky's works. She was a woman who had read widely, though unsystematically, in many languages, who had travelled extensively and met many learned and cultured persons, and who had spent many years in musing on "occult" wisdom. She was, besides, a woman of great shrewdness and even ability. It is only natural, therefore, that in the mountain of chaff there should be some grains of wheat. Be that as it may, and it is my belief that Mme Blavatsky can be undervalued, there are some conclusions that are quite certain. Her writings are in the main muddled rubbish, in which, generally speaking, what is her own is worthless, and what is good, or even what is accurate, is stolen from others. For her possession of genuine supernormal powers there is not a shred of evidence worthy of the name; while for the fact that she systematically and constantly faked phenomena, the evidence is complete. Of her personal character, the best that can be said is that she was an impulsive creature and that her impulses were sometimes good.

¹ *The Arjan Path* (1931), II. 299.

XX

THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

THE full facts about Mme Blavatsky were not, of course, known to Mrs Besant, but she had *The Secret Doctrine* before her and she now read Hodgson's report to the Society for Psychical Research. It made no impression on her, and this fact alone suffices to illustrate the force of the inner compulsion which was driving her into the congenial atmosphere of Theosophy. The very day after reading the report, not hesitating even as long as she had done before yielding to previous and less extreme conversions, she joined the Theosophical Society. When she received her diploma of membership Mrs Besant called again on Mme Blavatsky. "I went over to her, bent down and kissed her, but said no word. 'You have joined the Society?' 'Yes.' 'You have read the report?' 'Yes.' 'Well?' I knelt down before her and clasped her hands in mine, looking straight into her eyes. 'My answer is, will you accept me as your pupil, and give me the honour of proclaiming you my teacher in the face of the world?' Her stern, set face softened, the unwonted gleam of tears sprang to her eyes; then, with a dignity more than regal, she placed her hand upon my head. 'You are a noble woman. May Master bless you.'"

THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

From that day in May 1889 Mrs Besant remained a Theosophist. But now the position was not as it had been in the movements she had previously been connected with. Before she had always been at most second in command, but now, from the Spring of 1891, when Mme Blavatsky died, she was at the head. The Theosophical Society and Theosophy itself were Mrs Besant's to alter as she chose. She did choose time and again, as we shall see, and always triumphed, beating down the opposition that frequently arose.

It is an exceedingly difficult task to give an adequate account of the Theosophical Society, for much depends on the point of view. Take, for instance, at the very outset, the formation of the Society. This event might be described as follows: A Russian adventuress, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, after years of loose living in various parts of the world, finding herself destitute in America and at a loss how to earn a livelihood, searched in her memory and, putting together almost at random scraps remembered from her wide reading of "occult" writings, concocted a body of "esoteric" doctrine and formed the Theosophical Society for the purpose of propagating it and of securing for herself a home and support for her declining years.

Another version, that accepted by Theosophists, would be: A wealthy Russian noblewoman, Princess Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, receiving a communication from a body of lofty spiritual beings resident in the Himalayas, gave up home, husband, rank and

MRS ANNIE BESANT

wealth, to seek them out in Tibet, succeeded after immense sufferings in finding them, spent many years as their pupil, was designated by them as their messenger to all human beings, was instructed by them in the fundamental verities, and was finally sent out by them to instruct and save humanity through the intermediary of an organization to be called the Theosophical Society.

Leaving these opposing interpretations on one side, let us turn to the facts.

The Theosophical Society has three objects:

“To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.

“To encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy, and science.

“To investigate the unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in man.”

The following amplifying statement is issued by the Theosophical Society and was drawn up by Mrs Besant herself:

“The Theosophical Society is composed of students, belonging to any religion in the world or to none, who are united by their approval of the above objects, by their wish to remove religious antagonisms, and to draw together men of good will, whatsoever their religious opinions, and by their desire to study religious truths and to share the results of their studies with others. Their bond of union is not the profession of a common belief, but a common search and aspiration for Truth. They

THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

hold that Truth should be sought by study, by reflexion, by purity of life, by devotion to high ideals, and they regard Truth as a prize to be striven for, not as a dogma to be imposed by authority. They consider that belief should be the result of individual study or intuition and not its antecedent, and should rest on knowledge, not on assertion. They extend tolerance to all, even to the intolerant, not as a privilege they bestow, but as a duty they perform, and they seek to remove ignorance, not to punish it. They see every religion as an expression of the Divine Wisdom, and prefer its study to its condemnation, and its practice to proselytism. Peace is their watch-word as Truth is their aim.

“Theosophy is the body of truths which forms the basis of all religions, and which cannot be claimed as the exclusive possession of any. It offers a philosophy which renders life intelligible, and which demonstrates the justice and the love which guide evolution. It puts death in its rightful place as a recurring incident in an endless life, opening the gateway of a fuller and more radiant existence. It restores to the world the Science of the Spirit, teaching man to know the Spirit as himself, and the mind and body as his servants. It illuminates the Scriptures and doctrines of religions by unveiling their hidden meanings, and thus justifying them at the bar of intelligence, as they are ever justified in the eyes of intuition.

“Members of the Theosophical Society study these truths and Theosophists endeavour to live

them. Every one willing to study, to be tolerant, to aim high, and to work perseveringly, is welcomed as a member, and it rests with the member to become a true Theosophist.

“As the Theosophical Society has spread far and wide over the civilized world, and as members of all religions have become members of it, without surrendering the special dogmas, teachings and beliefs of their respective faiths, it is thought desirable to emphasize the fact that there is no doctrine, no opinion, by whomsoever taught or held, that is in any way binding on any member of the Society, none which any member is not free to accept or reject. Approval of its three objects is the sole condition of membership. No teacher or writer, from H. P. Blavatsky downwards, has any authority to impose his teachings or opinions on members. Every member has an equal right to attach himself to any teacher or to any school of thought which he may choose, but has no right to force his choice on any other. Neither a candidate for any office, nor any voter, can be rendered ineligible to stand or vote because of any opinion he may hold, or because of membership in any school of thought to which he may belong. Opinions or beliefs neither bestow privileges nor inflict penalties. The Members of the General Council earnestly request every member of the Theosophical Society to maintain, defend and act upon these fundamental principles of the Society, and also fearlessly to exercise his own liberty of thought and of expression.

THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

thereof, within the limits of courtesy and consideration for others.”

On this statement of faith the following comments must be made. Whether or not the reader agrees with it in detail, generally speaking it must be acknowledged that it is a perfectly proper document, embodying, indeed, lofty and noble sentiments. One cannot help noticing, for instance, with warm approval, the insistence on freedom of thought. This principle, it may be noted in passing, was introduced by Mrs Besant: Mme Blavatsky was quite open in exacting belief and obedience. But Mrs Besant was never tired of emphasizing the importance of thinking for oneself. Here, for instance, are three quotations from her books:

“Until a doctrine approves itself to your own intelligence and conscience it is not true for you.”¹

“You have to think for yourselves, or else to go ignorant and foolish all your days.”²

“Every human being must form his own opinions by his own strenuous efforts to discover truth, by the exercise of his own reasoning faculties, by the experiences of his own consciousness.”³

These wholly admirable principles are unfortunately very much at a discount in the Theosophical Society. It may be said without fear of contradiction that in practice the teachings of Mrs Besant and Mr Leadbeater, to say nothing of Mme Blavatsky, are taken as gospel by nearly all members of the Society,

¹ *Australian Lectures*: 1908, pp. 27-28.

² *Popular Lectures on Theosophy*: 1910, p. 72.

³ *Memories of Past Lives*: 1918, p. 7.

MRS ANNIE BESANT

and that those who are more independent are not welcome and soon resign. Indeed, this characteristic of Theosophists is the first that strikes every new member. The reason for this state of affairs is a simple one, and one which clearly shows Mrs Besant's responsibility for it. This reason is unfortunately one which it is impossible for one who knows the facts to discuss. I will endeavour to explain this in the briefest possible manner. There exists within the Theosophical Society an inner body called the Esoteric Section or Society, commonly referred to in the literature as the E.S. Every member of the Theosophical Society of a certain number of years' standing is entitled to apply for admission to this Esoteric Section. If his application is granted he is obliged to take a pledge, which is drafted in such terms that no one who has taken it cares to break it without the clearest justification. The present writer took that pledge nearly ten years ago, and though he has long ceased to be a member even of the Theosophical Society, he does not care to break the promise of secrecy then given. It will be enough to say that this pledge and the teachings of the E.S. are of such a kind as to make Mrs Besant's insistence on freedom of thought an utter mockery.

The evidence for this statement is overwhelming; I will content myself with a single quotation from the pen of Mr Leadbeater. Addressing members of the Theosophical Society, Mr Leadbeater wrote of Mrs Besant: "Think how great an honour it is for you that you should be permitted to work under her,

THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

for in doing so you are virtually working under Them [the Masters]. Think how watchful you should be to miss no hint which falls from her lips, to carry out exactly whatever instruction she may give you. Remember that because of her position as an Initiate she knows far more than you do; and precisely because her knowledge is occult, given under the seal of Initiation, she cannot share it with you. Therefore, her actions must constantly be governed by considerations of which you have no conceptions. There will be times when you cannot understand her motives, for she is taking into account many things which you cannot see and of which she must not tell you. But whether you understand or not, you will be wise to follow her implicitly, just because she knows. This is no mere supposition on my part, no mere flight of the imagination; I have stood beside your President in the presence of the Supreme Director of evolution on this globe, and I know whereof I speak."

A word now about the organization of the Society. Any seven members can form themselves into a lodge. Seven lodges may be grouped into a section or national society. The national societies are grouped into continental sections, and the whole organization is controlled from the headquarters at Adyar, near Madras. The governing body consists of the president, vice-president, treasurer, recording secretary, and a council consisting of the general secretaries of all the national societies, with certain additional members. During the first few years of the Society's existence there was only one lodge;

MRS ANNIE BESANT

in 1884 the number of lodges had increased to 99, in 1894 to 386, in 1904 to 800, in 1914 to 1520, and in 1924 to 2331. Not all these lodges survived however; in 1924 only 1576 charters were still operative out of the total 2331 granted. The individual membership has increased at a similar rate and now stands at about 50,000 throughout the world. The turnover rate, however, is even greater than in the case of lodges, the average duration of membership being very brief. The following table, compiled from official figures for the years 1908-1925, gives some idea of both the growth and the "real" growth of the Theosophical Society (1908 is the first full year after Mrs Besant became President and 1925 is the last year for which full figures are available):

<i>Year.</i>	<i>New Members.</i>	<i>Net Change.</i>	<i>Total Membership.</i>
1908	2,750	+ 754	15,617
1909	3,526	+1,281	16,898
1910	3,847	+3,458	20,356
1911	3,787	+1,108	21,464
1912	3,525	+1,676	23,140
1913	4,073	- 396	22,744
1914	3,998	+1,831	24,575
1915	3,099	+1,121	25,696
1916	3,696	+1,124	26,820
1917	4,404	+1,853	28,673
1918	3,429	+4,206 [<i>sic!</i>]	22,879
1919	5,171	+ 548	33,427
1920	6,377	+2,923	36,350
1921	7,154	+4,125	40,475
1922	5,391	- 702	39,773
1923	4,938	+1,223	40,996
1924	5,859	+ 896	41,892
1925	6,452	- 713	41,179

THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

From these figures it can be seen that although in the years 1908-1925 no less than 81,476 new members joined the Theosophical Society, the net gain during the same period was only 25,562.

XXI

THE NEW LIFE

AFTER she joined the Theosophical Society and became a disciple of Mme Blavatsky, Mrs Besant lost all patience with the tedious effort for social regeneration. Her eyes were no longer on the earth; they were again fixed on a distant star, a grail, a hope, an aspiration. One by one, she abandoned the National Secular Society, the Fabian Society, the London School Board, the matchgirls' and other trade unions.

In the Theosophical Society, however, Mrs Besant was given a warm welcome. It is true that Colonel Olcott wrote of "her air of a woman of the toiling class, her thick, laced boots, her skirts somewhat shortened to keep them tidy when trudging through the muddy streets of the East End, her red neckerchief of the true Socialist tinge and her close-cut hair, in short, an Annie Militant. Some of our people in the upper class in society were prepossessed against her, thinking that no great good could come from her importation of her fads and cranks into our respectable body." But whatever "some of our people in the upper classes" may have thought, the effective welcome was unmistakable. Immediately on joining Mrs Besant was appointed joint

THE NEW LIFE

editor, with Mme Blavatsky, of *Lucifer*, then the Society's official organ. In a few months she had risen to be President of the Blavatsky Lodge and member of the Society's governing body. By the autumn she was expert enough to compile, with Herbert Burrows, *A Short Glossary of Theosophical Terms*, and thereafter her books and pamphlets followed in an unceasing flood.

So completely had she come under Mme Blavatsky's influence that Mrs Besant now began herself to have occult experiences. We may remember the vivid phantasies of her childhood and girlhood; these now returned with increased vividness. The intense suggestibility of Mrs Besant is obvious to every careful student of her life and writings at that time, but direct evidence would have been lacking if she had not herself unwittingly provided it. In one of her later lectures Mrs Besant describes how she had first realized that she possessed the gift of clairvoyance. Discussing the matter with Mme Blavatsky she had deplored her lack of occult faculties, when Mme Blavatsky asked her whether she was not accustomed, when speaking in public, to visualize what she was going to say and to frame alternative phrasings for her thoughts. Mrs Besant assented, whereupon Mme Blavatsky said that that was clairvoyance.¹ Mrs Besant at once accepted this preposterous assertion, and ever after, no doubt, gave

¹ I am regretfully obliged to refer to this passage from memory, as I cannot remember where it occurs. I have no doubt of its substantial accuracy.

MRS ANNIE BESANT

forth as clairvoyant visions all the memory-images, hypnagogic and hypnopompic hallucinations, day-dreams, etc., etc., which are so vivid in persons who belong to the visualizing type.

Nor did Mrs Besant stop there. In her lecture *Why I became a Theosophist* she had, in speaking of the Masters, dropped a mysterious hint, telling the audience, that "unless every sense can be at the same time deceived . . . I have exactly the same certainty of the truth of these statements, as I have for the fact that you are here." Later, during her controversy with W. Q. Judge, she amplified this hint as follows: "My first-hand experience of the Masters, before I met Mr Judge, had been clear, definite, and absolutely convincing to me. On this was based my statement as to their existence, in my Hall of Science Speech, August, 1891 . . . [quoted above]. This experience began in 1889. I was making desperate efforts to pierce the darkness, and was seeking with passionate earnestness to obtain some direct evidence of the existence of the soul and the superphysical world; one evening as I sat alone, concentrating my mind on this longing, I heard the Master's voice—but knew not whose it was—and the promise that I should soon find the light—a promise quickly verified. As I did not till later know who had spoken to me, I ought not to put this as evidence at that time, and it was in the summer of 1889 that I gained my first direct evidence. I was in Fontainebleau, and was sleeping in a small room by myself; I was waked suddenly and sat up in bed

THE NEW LIFE

startled, to find the air of the room thrown into pulsing electric waves, and then appeared the radiant astral Figure of the Master, visible to my physical eyes. Between that summer and . . . 1891, I had had a considerable number of such first-hand experiences, appealing to sight, hearing and touch, to say nothing of the exquisite fragrance, generally accompanying such manifestations, and the statements made to me on some of these occasions were of such a nature that they were verified by subsequent events."

How did Mrs Besant come to have these hallucinations? I do not hesitate to disregard the possibility that they were genuine manifestations. A study of the growth of the idea of the Masters in Mme Blavatsky's fertile imagination appears to me wholly to preclude the possibility that there really are Masters who really can manifest. Even if there are, it is too much to believe that they should manifest in precisely the manner devised in Mme Blavatsky's imagination. What then is the explanation? There is no evidence, and we can only speculate. Where information in such a case is wanting, speculation, if clearly described as such, is harmless. Let us therefore consider the following facts.

In the summer of 1889, so unhesitating was Mrs Besant's plunge into Theosophy, she, Mme Blavatsky and a group of disciples set up house together in Avenue Road, near Regent's Park. From here the Theosophical Society was administered, and here

MRS ANNIE BESANT

functioned the Esoteric Section to which reference has been made in an earlier section. Even the E.S., however, was not exclusive enough, and an Inner Group, the I.G., was formed within it. For this I.G. there was built in the house a secret room in which the privileged members performed their rites and mysteries. Mrs Besant, of course, was of the group. What was done in this room is unknown, beyond the fact that the disciples dabbled in hypnotism,¹ a practice soon after discontinued in the Theosophical Society, as soon, in fact, as it became orthodox practice.

A well-known phenomenon in hypnotism, called post-hypnotic suggestion, consists in a statement by the hypnotizer to the hypnotized subject that at a given time the latter will have a specified experience. Thus, the hypnotizer may say to the sleeping subject, "Next Tuesday afternoon at a quarter to five you will see the door of your room open and a tall Red Indian will come in, touch you on the head, and leap out of the window." At the hour specified the subject will in fact have that experience, in a purely subjective form of course. In other words an hallucination will have been induced in him. This phenomenon is a commonplace of hypnotic practice and can be repeated at will with any suitable subject. Now, Mme Blavatsky knew all about hypnotism,

¹ This fact, having been published, was confirmed to me by the late Mr G. R. S. Mead, a member of the Inner Group, and for long connected with Mme Blavatsky and Mrs Besant. Further information he consistently refused to give, holding that even after forty years he was bound by his oath of secrecy.

THE NEW LIFE

a fashionable "occult" subject of her time, and the relation between her and her pupils was ideal for post-hypnotic suggestion. Does this fact not throw a highly suggestive light on Mrs Besant's experiences at that time?



XXII

ONWARD AND UPWARD

MRS BESANT had hoped to find peace in Theosophy, and she declared that she had in fact found it. But if so it was a purely inward peace. In May 1891 Mme Blavatsky died and this event threw the Theosophical Society into a whirlpool of contending ambitions. Colonel Olcott, the first and chief colleague of the dead woman, was in India; W. Q. Judge, one of the original founders and head of the Society in America, was in the United States; Mrs Besant was on board ship on her way back to England from America, where she had gone on a Theosophical mission. Who was to obtain the vacant leadership? Judge hurriedly came to England, forged a number of letters from the Masters, and by this simple means gained Mrs Besant's confidence. They decided to leave the now hollow title of President to Olcott and to share between themselves the effective leadership, *that of the E.S.*

Soon, however, Mrs Besant began to suspect the forgeries, which were certainly obvious enough. "I made a direct appeal to the Master, when alone, stating that I felt some doubt as to Mr Judge's use of his name, and praying him to endorse or disavow the messages I had received through him. He

ONWARD AND UPWARD

appeared to me as I had so often before seen him, clearly, unmistakably, and I then learned from him directly that the messages were not done by him, and that they were done by Mr Judge." "Take up the heavy Karma of the Society," the Master continued, "Your strength was given you for this." Such an appeal was never addressed to Mrs Besant in vain.

While all this storm was brewing Mrs Besant went again to America to lecture, and came there under the influence of G. N. Chakravarti, who claimed profound occult knowledge and extensive magical powers. They joined forces, he slept outside her door at night to protect her from inimical spiritual forces, and gradually led her mind to India and its mysteries. From this moment Judge's fate was sealed. Mrs Besant sailed for India, discussed the situation with Olcott, and formulated specific charges against Judge. The latter evaded the proposed inquiry on a technical plea. Confronted with this situation, Mrs Besant took a bold step; she sailed for Australia, conducted a vigorous campaign for Theosophy, founded a new section, and, with its backing, evicted Judge. His supporters in America seceded and formed a separate organization, with headquarters at Point Loma, California, of which Mrs Tingley later became the leader.

Mrs Besant now held undisputed sway over the Theosophical world, for Olcott, already an old man, was a mere figure-head. Moreover, it was Mrs Besant who was the head of the E.S., and all that this

MRS ANNIE BESANT

position implied. She marked the occasion by publishing in that year (1895) sixteen books and pamphlets, totalling well over 900 pages; translating *The Bhagavad-Gîta*; writing a preface to another work; continuing to edit *Lucifer*; and giving a large number of lectures.

So the position remained until Olcott's death in 1907. Mrs Besant steadily lectured and wrote, extending the Theosophical Society into most parts of the world, and producing a series of books of which the following are the most important or bulky: *In the Outer Court* (1895), *Karma* (1895), *The Self and its Sheaths* (1895), *Man and his Bodies* (1896), *The Path of Discipleship* (1896), *The Ancient Wisdom* (1897), *Four Great Religions* (1897), *Evolution of Life and Form* (1899), *Some Problems of Life* (1900), *Esoteric Christianity* (1901), *Thought Power* (1901), *The Pedigree of Man* (1904), *A Study in Consciousness* (1904). On Olcott's death she became in fact as well as in spirit President of the Theosophical Society, being regularly re-elected thereafter each seven years.

After Mrs Besant's election as President the flood of publications from her pen was slightly abated, but only by the widening of her activities for the Society. Whatever part of its work she turned to she organized and soundly established, only too often to see it collapse in the hands of her incompetent followers. This has been the fate more than once of, for instance, the Theosophical Publishing House in England. Theosophists have always been too much inclined

ONWARD AND UPWARD

to entrust necessary pieces of work not to those competent to do them but rather to those whose status in the E.S. justifies favourable treatment. Mrs Besant fortunately, was competent as well as "sound" esoterically, and most things she turned her hand to flourished: the schools, the various publishing societies, the printing presses at Adyar, the headquarters themselves, which grew and developed, and, in short the entire organization and framework of the Theosophical Society. Nor did Theosophy itself escape the organizing process; and it is now time that I gave an account of these new truths to which Mrs Besant had given her allegiance.

XXIII

THEOSOPHY

THE difficulties in arriving at a true estimate of the Theosophical Society are as nothing to the difficulty of obtaining an accurate notion of Theosophy itself. Theosophy is alleged to be a body of doctrine containing certain essential truths given to the world by a hierarchy of higher beings. It might be supposed, therefore, that Theosophy is a fixed and static thing. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Mme Blavatsky, were she to return to earth to-day, would scarcely recognize the Theosophy of Mrs Besant in its latest forms. And in addition there are considerable differences, often on essential points, between the Theosophies of Mrs Besant, of Rudolf Steiner, of Mrs Tingley, and of others. Moreover, the casual inquirer into Theosophy would be astounded at the differences he could find between Mrs Besant's publications at various periods of her Theosophical career. What I propose to do, therefore, is to give a sort of composite picture of Theosophy as taught by Mrs Besant, warning the reader, however, that he would have no difficulty in supplying from Mrs Besant's own words different versions of many points of detail.

According to Theosophy the first absolute and

THEOSOPHY

universal truth is the unity of God, who is the cause of all existences that have been, that are, and that are yet to be, the life beyond and above living things, the consciousness in which inhere all consciousnesses, the changeless. This unity in manifestation is called the Logos and has three aspects: "Coming forth from the depths of the One Existence," writes Mrs Besant, "from the One beyond all thought and all speech, a Logos, by imposing on Himself a limit, circumscribing voluntarily the range of His own Being, becomes the Manifested God, and tracing the limiting sphere of His activity, thus outlines the area of His universe. Within that area the universe is born, is evolved, and dies; it lives, it moves, it has its being in Him; its matter is His breath: its forces and energies are currents of His life; He is immanent in every atom; all-pervading; all-sustaining; all-evolving; He is its source and its end, its cause and its object, its centre and circumference; it is built on Him as its sure foundation, it breathes in Him as its encircling space; He is in everything, and everything in Him. Thus have the Sages of the Ancient Wisdom taught us of the beginning of the manifested worlds. From the same source we learn of the Self-unfolding of the Logos into a three-fold form; the First Logos, the Root of all Being, the *Will* which outbreathes and inbreathes the worlds; from Him the Second Logos, manifesting the two aspects of life and form, the primal duality, making the two poles of nature between which the web of the universe is to be woven—life-form,

MRS ANNIE BESANT

spirit-matter, positive-negative, active-receptive, Father-Mother of the Worlds—the *Wisdom*, or Pure Reason, ‘mightily and sweetly ordering all things,’ sustaining the universe; the Third Logos, the Universal Active or Creative *Mind*, that in which all archetypically exists, the source of beings, the fount of fashioning energies, the treasure-house in which are stored up all the archetypal forms which are to be brought forth and elaborated in matter during the evolution of the universe, the fruits of past universes, brought over as seeds for the present.”

Under the triune Logos, the universe is governed by a vast hierarchy of beings: the seven spirits; the secondary Logoi, who rule whole sections of the universe; still lesser Logoi, who rule single solar systems; and immense numbers of spiritual intelligences of vastly varying degrees; and only then do we come to man and to what lies below him.

The whole of this hierarchy is governed by strict laws of evolution. Life-form, as distinct from life-essence, first makes its appearance on the higher planes, being then known as elemental life. It gradually descends to earth in the form of mineral life, which then divides into two main streams, water and earth. From this point form divides into six, and eventually seven (for in Theosophy everything happens in sevens), main streams. Water takes two lines. In one it develops into three types of etheric forms, occupying various depths of the oceans; on the highest of these etheric levels are the water undines. Along the second line there develop the

THEOSOPHY

seaweeds, then the corals and sponges, then the cephalopods, and finally the fishes. At this point the two streams of water life unite into a single stream, which produces fairies and cloud-spirits.

The second, earth, stream of life-form has four divisions. The first is that which produces the gnomes who are attached to the depths of the earth, these later developing into mobile gnomes. The second produces in turn fungi, bacteria, insects, small reptiles, and finally birds. The third produces grasses, cereals, bees and ants and finally the smallest etheric creatures. The fourth produces in turn mosses, ferns, flowering plants, and trees.

At the point at which we left the first three lines of earth-form these unite to produce terrestrial fairies and salamanders. Then the highest forms of the two water lines of evolution (that is, the cloud spirits) unite with the highest form of the first three earth lines (that is, salamanders) to form sylphs. We now return to the fourth earth line, which we left at the point when it had reached the tree stage. Here it divides into two, which form respectively the greater reptiles and the lower mammals, then uniting again to form the mammals.

Thus, at this point the evolution of life-form again moves in only two channels, the sylphs on the one hand, the mammals on the other. The sylphs develop into Kama Devas, Rupa Devas, and Arupa Devas; the mammals develop into men, disciples, and Adepts. Form-life has then completed its evolution and the two lines unite into the Dhyan-Chohans.

MRS ANNIE BESANT

Before this the perfect man is confronted by six choices: he can remain with humanity as an official of the hierarchy or as a nirmanakaya; he can join the angelic devas; he can join the staff of the Logos; he can prepare the work of the next chain; or he can enter nirvana.

The Chohans have then reached the sixth stage of initiation of the Great White Brotherhood which constitutes the inner government of the world. Within this Brotherhood evolution still continues, on seven rays of development. On five of the rays the Chohan can become a Mahachohan; on the second ray he can become a Bodhisattva and finally a Buddha in his eighth initiation. On the first ray the Chohan can become a Manu, a Pratyeka Buddha, the Lord of the World, and on the tenth and final initiation, The Silent Watcher, who is the head of the hierarchy. It must however be pointed out that human beings now developing on the earth have no hope of reaching this position, for the post of head of the hierarchy is so important that the Adept now holding it was transferred for the purpose from the Venus scheme of evolution; he was put in charge of terrestrial evolution some six and a half million years ago.

It follows from this fact that life evolves throughout the entire cosmic system, not separately within any one part of it. In the system of our own particular planetary chain, life progresses through seven planets, of which the first, second, sixth and seventh, are unnamed, while the third, fourth and fifth are Mars,

THEOSOPHY

the Earth, and Mercury. On planet A life is solely mental, in B it comes down into astral "matter" as well, and in Mars, the Earth and Mercury, it descends to the physical plane. In F it is again astral and mental and in G mental only. Thence life proceeds to another planetary chain. For instance, we are now not only on the fourth planet of a particular planetary chain, but this planetary chain is the fourth of a series, seven of which form one scheme of evolution. The immediately preceding planetary chain was that of the moon, notwithstanding the fact that the moon is of course not a planet at all.

On each of the planets life, when it reaches the human level (after passing through a succession of rounds and world periods), forms root-races and sub-races. To sum up: seven sub-races form a root-race; seven root-races form a world period; seven world periods form a round; seven rounds form a chain; seven chains form a scheme of evolution; an indefinite number of schemes of evolution forms a solar system; and an indefinite but extremely large number of solar systems forms the entire scheme of things.

Our own solar system has twelve planets, Vulcan, Mercury, Venus, Earth, Eros, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, "O," and "P." Descending now to our own infinitesimal planet, the earth, we find that it is possible to reconstruct very exactly the course of human evolution on it. The reason for this is that the Great White Brotherhood, the governing hierarchy of the world, have a museum

in which they preserve specimens of all the forms of life which have ever existed, together with the necessary maps and models to make them intelligible. Human beings who are approaching the threshold of divinity, like Mr Leadbeater, naturally have clairvoyant access to this museum, and can bring us back news of what is contained in it. In this way there have been drawn maps of the earth as it existed at various periods as far back as a million years ago.

At that time most of those surfaces of the earth which are now land were water, and vice versa. The biggest continent occupied part of what is now the Pacific Ocean. This was Lemuria, and the woolly-haired races which still survive are descended from the Lemurians.

After the passage of two hundred thousand years the configuration of the earth had again changed considerably. That which is now the Atlantic Ocean was land. This was the fabled Atlantis, from the inhabitants of which the Mongolians and American Indians are descended.

As the years passed Atlantis in its turn diminished, and in, precisely, the year 9564 B.C. there occurred a huge convulsion, the origin of the Biblical flood. This swept away the last remnant of Atlantis, and the earth gradually took on its present appearance.

As we have seen, each of these states of the earth has its own characteristic human population, in accordance with the great plan, for we know that humanity progresses by root-races and sub-races. The Lemurians formed the third root-race (of earth

life), and out of the seventh and last of its sub-races was formed the fourth or Atlantean root-race. This in its turn consisted of seven sub-races, the Rmoahal, the Tlavatli, the Toltec, the Turanian, the ancient Semitic, the Acadian, and the Mongolian. We ourselves, generally speaking, belong to the fifth or Aryan root-race. The first five sub-races of the Aryan root-race are the Hindu-Egyptian, the Aryan-Semitic, the Iranian, the Celtic and the Teutonic, the last of which represents the dominant sub-race of the present day, a doctrine which no doubt makes its appeal in present-day Germany. The sixth sub-race is now in process of formation in America, and Mr Krishnamurti was to have been the "vehicle" of its prophet, as we shall see later.

The process of evolution by which life progresses along the vast road which has now been sketched is a massive one and has two main aspects, the evolution of life in form and the evolution of life in essence. The former we have already glanced at, and we have seen that according to Theosophy there is direct continuity from form in its most primitive manifestations as earth and water up to and beyond the invisible forms of divinity. The evolution of life itself is equally complex and has been worked out in equal detail. It is governed by two fundamental laws, the law of reincarnation and the law of Karma. From a purely philosophical point of view it is this part of Theosophy which is the most attractive. It is based on a fundamental doctrine of duality, the essential separateness of life and of matter, which

MRS ANNIE BESANT

separately pursue their distinct courses of evolution, except when from time to time they are brought into mutual contact to manifest as a living form. Thus while form develops upwards from the mineral state, so does life develop upwards from its occupancy of mineral form. But this latter evolution is very different from that of form. In the evolution of form there is no individual continuity, each particular form ceasing to be on the removal of the life animating it and being replaced by another distinct form. In the evolution of life, on the other hand, there is, broadly speaking, a limited stock of specific entities in process of evolution, and it is this same stock which progresses throughout the course of evolution.

Thus when the narcissus dies its evolution as such is completed from the point of view of form, and the narcissus-form evolution is carried on by other narcissi. But when the life of the narcissus departs from it it returns to and is re-absorbed into a sub-group-soul of the main narcissus group-soul. In doing so it enriches the sub-group as a whole with the experience gained by it during its occupation of a narcissus form. Hence when next a portion of this same sub-group incarnates a narcissus form it is able to do so in a slightly higher type of flower. This process goes on, the group-soul containing fewer and fewer entities, until it reaches the human level, when each soul becomes a separate and distinct consciousness, thus itself deriving the entire benefit of its own experiences, since now a whole

THEOSOPHY

soul occupies a single physical body. The individualized life then continues to evolve on lines parallel with those of life-form, which we have already glanced at.

Theosophy does not uphold the theory that man, in his physical aspect, evolved from an ape-like progenitor. According to Theosophy the lower forms develop into man along seven paths of evolution. These are represented, below humanity, by the dog, the cat, the horse, the elephant, the monkey, and two other unspecified lines. On reaching humanity, these seven lines are represented by the devotional, the affectionate, the dramatic, the scientific, the executive, the philosophic, and the ritualistic man. Mrs Besant herself evolved along the monkey-line, and a clairvoyant description of the critical moment in her case will be quoted in a later section.

The intervals between lives tend to get longer and longer as evolution proceeds, and we shall see later that clairvoyants have been alleged to inspect the actual evolution of certain individuals throughout a long course of lives. When, however, the individual has attained an advanced point of development he is reincarnated as and when his services are needed. *Broadly speaking the intervals before this stage is reached, are on something like this scale: for a degenerate 5 years, for a savage 40, for a mechanic 200, for a doctor 1000, for an idealist 1200, and for a disciple 2300.*

The as-it-were operative principle of reincarnation is the law of Karma. This is in effect a replica of

MRS ANNIE BESANT

the physical law of cause and effect. It teaches that as in the physical world there is no effect without a cause so in the evolution of life there is no causeless accident. This is often expressed in the Biblical phrase, "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." The operation of Karma has been very elaborately worked out in the literature of Theosophy, but it is impossible to enter into this at all closely. A few examples will suffice. It is stated that a good environment in this life is the result of helpful actions performed in last lives; aspirations produce capacities or ideals, experiences wisdom, painful experiences conscience, the will to serve spirituality, etc., etc.

The dual process of reincarnation and Karma has one very important and radical feature which is not possessed by the physical law of cause and effect. The latter is purely mechanical in its operation, but the former is operated by officials appointed for the purpose, the Lords of Karma. It is these who devise bodies to suit the soul that awaits re-birth, and generally govern the whole process.

It only remains to give some account of the constitution of man and the universe. Man consists of seven elements, parts or planes. These are as follows: (1) *Adi* or the ego, the loftiest principle of man, only one part or aspect of which is ever in physical manifestation. This is known as the individuality. (2) *Anupadaka*, or the personality. The relation between the individuality and the personality has been expressed by comparing the

personality with a single facet of a many-sided solid, the individuality, one facet representing any particular life. (3) Atma, or spirit. (4) Buddhi, or intuition. (5) Manas, or mind. (6) Astral, or emotional. And finally (7) Physical.

This constitution extends throughout the whole solar system, which is built up of seven planes corresponding to the seven planes of men. Thus the physical in man corresponds to the physical world, the astral to purgatory, the mental to heaven, and so on. These planes are essential to the process of reincarnation. On death the life of the man rises to the astral plane, where it lives in its astral body. Thence it progresses, if sufficiently evolved, to the mental plane, and so on. Thus, in the instances we have examined, the degenerate's 5 years of discarnate life and the savage's 40 are all spent on the astral plane; the mechanic gets 160 years on the lower mental plane; the doctor gets 975 years on the same plane and a brief experience of the higher heaven; the idealist spends only 5 years on the astral plane, has 1150 years on the lower mental plane, and 50 on the higher; while the disciple proceeds direct to the lower heaven, where he spends 2150 years, before proceeding for 150 years in the higher heaven.

Such is Mrs Besant's Theosophy, and it will be plain to the reader that this is not a system which can be criticized. Theosophy is authoritarian to what is probably a unique degree. So many and such

MRS ANNIE BESANT

startling assumptions are made on pure assertion that reasoned criticism is simply irrelevant. The Theosophical leaders have ordained that "Take or leave it" shall be the watchword of Theosophy: and no other course is open to us.

XXIV

INDIA: A NATION

ANNIE BESANT'S interest in India was not created by her adoption of Theosophy. A full ten years before she joined the Theosophical Society in 1889, saw her entering a passionate defence of India and Afghanistan against the policy of Disraeli in England and Lytton in India. For instance, in 1879, as we have already noted, she published through the Freethought Publishing Company a pamphlet energetically entitled *The Story of Afghanistan: or Why the Tory Government gags the Indian Press. A Plea for the Weak against the Strong.*

Anticipating protest against her criticism of England's conduct in India, Annie Besant wrote in this pamphlet: "It is said to be unpatriotic to blame one's country. But not so have I read England's noblest patriots. Love of England does not mean approval and endorsement of the policy of some Oriental adventurer whom chance and personal ability and unscrupulousness have raised to power. Love of England means reverence of her past, work for her future; it means sympathy with all that is noble and great in her history, and endeavour to render her yet more noble, yet more great; it means triumph in her victories over oppression, delight in

her growing freedom, glory in her encouragement of all nations struggling towards liberty; it means pride in her pure name, in her fair faith, in her unsoiled honor, in her loyal word; it means condemnation of her bullying, boasting, cruel imperialism . . . and regretful remorseful turning back to the old paths of duty, honor, and of faith.

"Therefore this plea of mine for the weak against the strong is not an unpatriotic attack on our own beloved land, but rather the loving effort of a child to save a mother whose honor and whose life are threatened by unscrupulous betrayers."

This is a noble doctrine, nobly stated, and nobly maintained during more than half a century of such pleas "for the weak against the strong."

After joining the Theosophical Society Annie Besant not only took up the cause of India with renewed vigour, but also, in 1893, made her permanent home in that country. During her first visit in that year Mrs Besant travelled 6000 miles into many parts of the continent and delivered 120 lectures and addresses in public.¹ Wherever she went she was met with enthusiastic fervour, which did not diminish as she more and more exalted the ancient wisdom of India, and particularly of Hinduism. Already on this first visit she bathed in the Ganges and in effect proclaimed her adherence

¹ In considering the number of Mrs Besant's public addresses on her various tours, it must always be remembered that for every lecture in public she gave two or three or more in private to members of the T. S., to members of the E. S., to members of the higher grades of the E. S., to the leaders only, and so on.

to Hinduism, as she later did with every possible emphasis. By 1915 she was able to write: "For nearly two and twenty years I have lived among Indians, not as a foreigner but as one of themselves. Hindu in all save the outer ceremonies for which my white skin disqualifies me, living in Indian fashion, feeling with Indian feelings, one with Indians in heart, in hopes, in aspirations, in labours for the country, knowing their weakness as well as their strength, I dare to claim an intimacy of knowledge and an identity of sentiment which qualify me to speak on their behalf."

Her exclusive concern with religious and educational problems at this time may be judged from Mrs Besant's farewell message before she left after her first visit. "My work in the sphere of politics," she announced, "is over, and I shall never resume it." She continued: "To be able to lay at the feet of India any service is to me full reward for the many sufferings of a stormy life through which the power of service has been won. But the India that I love and reverence, and would fain see living among the nations, is not an India westernized, rent with the struggles of political parties, heated with the fires of political passions, with a people ignorant and degraded, while those who might have raised them are fighting for the loaves and fishes of political triumph. . . . The India to which I belong in faith and heart is . . . a civilization in which spiritual knowledge was accounted highest title to honour, and in which the people revered and sought after

spiritual truth. To help in turning India into another Great Britain or another Germany is an ambition that does not allure me; the India I would give my life to help in building is an India learned in the ancient philosophy, pulsing with the ancient religion—an India to which all other lands should look for spiritual life—where the life of all should be materially simple, but intellectually noble and spiritually sublime . . . I honestly believe that the future of India, the greatness of India, and the happiness of her people, can never be secured by political methods, but only by the revival of her philosophy and religion. To this, therefore, I must give all my energies, and I must refuse to spread them over other fields.”

As we have already seen renunciation was at that moment Mrs Besant’s watchword. She was thoroughly weary of the dulness and tediousness of political effort; and this feeling is reflected in her message to India. But such feelings have a way of wearing off. In that year of 1893, during which she first set foot in India, Mrs Besant had published her *Autobiography*, in which her interest in India is hardly more than hinted at. Fifteen years later she added a new Preface, in which occurs the following passage: “Nineteen years have passed away since I joined the Theosophical Society, as recorded at the close of this book, and during these nineteen years I have been lecturing and writing on its behalf, and have travelled pretty well all over the world in its service. Most European countries have been visited, and branches of the Society founded in each;

INDIA: A NATION

France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, have all listened willingly to the message of Theosophy, and groups of members are to be found in most of the large towns in all of them. England, Scotland, and Ireland, naturally, have had the lion's share of this propaganda work in Europe, and I regard the great change which has come over English thought—the turning away from materialism and the revival of mysticism—as due to that great wave of spiritual life of which the Theosophical Society is the crest.

“To America I have travelled many times, lecturing in the larger cities, and to Australia and New Zealand the same work has led me. Most of all has India been the field of labour since I first went thither in 1893. The Indian work is, first of all, the revival, strengthening, and uplifting of the ancient religions—Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and, in Ceylon and Burmah, Buddhism. The success with which this has been accomplished by the Theosophical Society is acknowledged on all sides, friendly and hostile, and this revival of the old faiths has brought with it a new self-respect, a pride in the past, a belief in the future, and as an inevitable result, a great wave of patriotic life, the beginning of the rebuilding of a nation. The work, in the second place, has been educational, and the note of this has been the wedding of Western education with Eastern religion and Eastern ethics, and the carrying on of colleges and schools under the control of Indians, instead of under the control of Government or of missionaries—the

MRS ANNIE BESANT

sole educationists until the Theosophical Society stepped into the field. In Ceylon, three colleges and over two hundred schools are flourishing under the care of Buddhist Theosophists. In India, two colleges and a growing number of schools, both for boys and girls, are being directed by Hindu Theosophists. Five free schools in Madras are being maintained for the pariah population, and are crowded with hitherto neglected children."

The importance of the work she did there, and its general trend, can be gathered from the following eloquent tribute, which is the more eloquent from being unintended as a tribute. Sir Valentine Chirol in his *Times* articles on what he called Indian Unrest, wrote that "the advent of the Theosophists, heralded by Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott, gave a fresh impetus to the revival, and certainly no Hindu has done so much to organize and consolidate the movement as Mrs Annie Besant, who, in her Central Hindu College at Benares and her Theosophical Institution at Adyar, near Madras, has openly proclaimed her faith in the superiority of the whole Hindu system to the vaunted civilization of the West. Is it surprising that Hindus should turn their backs upon our civilization, when a European of highly-trained intellectual power and with an extraordinary gift of eloquence comes and tells them that it is they who possess and have from all times possessed, the key to supreme wisdom; that their gods, their philosophy, their morality are on a

INDIA: A NATION

higher plane of thought than the West has ever reached?"¹

As may be gathered from this passage, Annie Besant's two chief lines of approach to the re-awakening of India and the achievement of Home Rule within the Empire, were the religious and the educational, though these are so closely inter-connected as not to be capable of being separated. When Annie Besant first went to India she found that "Colonel Olcott had revived Buddhism and greatly uplifted Zoroastrianism; my first task, as he gladly acknowledged, was to perform the same service to Hinduism, and to this I set myself, showing the insufficiency of materialism as an answer to the problems of life, and the immense superiority of Hinduism as a philosophy encasing an all-embracing religion and a science of yoga, which was an open road to the worlds invisible, to the ancient Rishis of India and the East, to the Saints of Christendom, to the Wisdom which included all religions, excluded none."

The ground had been well prepared by Colonel Olcott, whose only permanently valuable work this was. In the first lecture he delivered in Bombay, on 23 March 1879, he spoke of the "majesty and sufficiency of Eastern Scriptures," and made an appeal "to the sentiment of patriotic loyalty to the memory of their forefathers to stand by their old religions." After the 1884 Theosophical Congress at Adyar, a number of the delegates formed the Committee

¹ (Sir) Valentine Chirol, *Indian Unrest* (London 1910), pp 28-29

MRS ANNIE BESANT

which organized the National Congress, the first meeting of which took place in 1885. Colonel Olcott had founded a considerable number of Buddhist schools in Ceylon; the Muhommadans and Parsis had their schools; and so Mrs Besant set out to do the same for the Hindus. She organized the foundation in Benares of the two upper classes of a High School and the lower stages of a College, an establishment which eventually became the Central Hindu College, which in 1916 became in turn the nucleus of the present Hindu University, which gave its first two honorary degrees to the Prince of Wales and to Mrs Besant.

In India, as elsewhere, the most striking aspect of Annie Besant's work was the fact that to a sweeping and far-seeing conception of the task in hand she joined a close and meticulous grasp of detail. Few imaginations could have conceived the plan for no less a task than the physical, intellectual and spiritual revival of India, a country, nay, a continent, enormous in size, enormous in population, enormously diverse and complex. Fewer would have had the courage and patience to continue against all opposition on the path to the desired goal. But who else than Annie Besant could have added to these things the knowledge and patience, which, not satisfied with the establishment of the College, wrote some of its most important text-books, organized its boys into debating-clubs, into sports-organizations, bade them join physical development to intellectual training, lectured to them, and, in short, treated them in

INDIA: A NATION

such a way that in India to-day there are thousands of men who addressed Annie Besant as "Mother."

Although Annie Besant made it her life-work to revivify in India a pure and orthodox Hinduism, she was not blind to the anomalies created by that religion in the modern world. Consequently she advocated, and succeeded in the Theosophical Society, at least, in bringing about, a relaxation of the strict rules of caste; she fought for the education of the women and the enlargement of their liberty; she took a firm stand against child-marriage, not only by argument and by advocacy, but by closing the upper classes of the Central Hindu School to married boys and by doubling the fees for married first and second year students in the College; and she adopted a similar attitude in kindred problems.

All this, however, marked only the beginning of Annie Besant's labours for India. These various activities, as has already been hinted, were but the prelude to a still greater task, the gaining for India of self-government. Shortly before the war Annie Besant initiated a sustained agitation for Home Rule. She employed every constitutional instrument that lay to her hand, and the training she had received in her early days in England enabled her to speak with full force and knowledge for the inexperienced Indians against the subtle methods of the Government. "The definite campaign for Home Rule," wrote Annie Besant, "began in the spring of 1914, on January 2, when my fellow-workers and myself started a weekly Review, *The Commonwealth*. . . .

We stood for Religious Liberty, regarding all religions as ways to God; for National Education, 'with an open path from primary schools to the Universities'; for Social Reform, including foreign travel, uplift of the submerged classes, abolition of child-marriage, seclusion of women, color bar and the caste system."

Later in the same year Annie Besant bought a Madras daily paper, and renamed it *New India*. "Round this and the weekly *Commonweal* was destined to rage the battle for Home Rule against the use of the tyrannical Press Law (abolished by Reformed Councils in 1921 with a mass of other cruel legislation, including the Rowlatt Act), and they bore aloft the banner of Home Rule through the years of the Great Agitation which ended in 1917, when Britain declared her goal to be the establishment of Self-Government in India."

During this agitation Annie Besant not only edited these two newspapers (in addition, of course, to her routine Theosophical editing and other literary work), and organized the Home Rule League and the Congress League, not only wrote numerous pamphlets dealing with the most detailed aspects of the Indian problems, in such series as the *New India Political Pamphlets*, the *National Conference Series* and the *National Home Rule League Series*, but also published many books. These range from *India and the Empire* (1914), *The Birth of New India* (1917), *Congress Speeches* (1917) and *For India's Uplift* (1917), to *Wake up, India: a Plea for Social Reform* (1913), the monumental *How India Wrought*

INDIA: A NATION

for Freedom: the Story of the National Congress told from Official Records (1915) and India: a Nation.

This last book was first published in the well-known series called *The People's Books*; on being republished in India the English Government caused it to be withdrawn from circulation in 1916. In the following year Annie Besant and two of her fellow-workers on *New India* were interned without cause shown. "When we, the interned, foregathered at Ootacamund (where I had, as President of the Theosophical Society, a little house), a whirlwind broke out, raged up and down the country, stormed over to Britain, Russia, France, America, at several hundred miles an hour. Questions were asked in the House of Commons and the Viceroy's Legislative Council. Members of Parliament, like the babes in the wood, were snowed under with leaves—of paper. 'Who would have thought,' said a very high official pensively, 'that there would have been such a fuss over an old woman?' Crowds of people and many popular leaders joined the Home Rule League. Meetings were held; resolutions flew about; C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar, Jamnadas Dwarkadas, Congressmen everywhere, fanned the storm and rode it. They preserved perfect order; never a window was broken; never a riot occurred; never a policeman was assaulted; never man, woman or child went to gaol. For three months the vehement agitation continued unbrokenly, without ever breaking a law, and the students who wanted to strike were kept in their schools and colleges and then—came the Declaration

MRS ANNIE BESANT

of August 20, 1917, that the goal of Great Britain in India was Responsible Government, and an announcement that the Secretary of State for India was coming thither to learn the wishes of the people. To 'obtain a calm atmosphere' the three internees were liberated."

This constitutional triumph was crowned by the election of Annie Besant as President for 1917 of the National Congress for India, a personal triumph as well as a political one. But Annie Besant was never content to rest on her laurels; she continued the work, though there was no longer need for such intense agitation as before, and what may be reasonably regarded as the climax of her work was reached in 1925. In that year the Labour Party in England adopted as its official policy in regard to India *The Commonwealth of India Bill*, which had been worked out during the three previous years, and finally adopted by the National Convention, of which Annie Besant was Secretary. The purpose of this Bill is to place India on an equal footing with the Self-Governing Dominions, sharing their responsibilities and their privileges. In her last message *To my Brothers and Sisters in India* (1917) before being interned, Annie Besant thus summed up her creed: "I am old, but I believe that I shall see India win Home Rule before I die. If I have helped ever so little to the realization of that glorious hope, I am more than satisfied."

In addition to those mentioned above some of Annie Besant's more important works on India are

INDIA: A NATION

Letters to a Young Indian Prince (1921), in which are given detailed recommendations for the re-organization of a small state along modern lines; *The Future of Indian Politics* (1922), which is a contribution to the understanding of present-day problems; *Indian Art* (1925), being the first series of Kamala Lectures before the University of Calcutta; and *India: Bond or Free?* (1926), a systematic survey of the past, present and future of India.

One of Mrs Besant's last activities in India was the organization of a Boy Scout Movement, of which she was appointed the Honorary Commissioner for India. Through storms and contumely she had come to respect and even respectability. On the occasion of her Jubilee celebrations Viscount Willingdon was able to write: "I am anxious to express my very sincere personal gratitude to her for her constant support and assistance to myself during those years in upholding and promoting the cause of constitutional progress in the Madras Presidency, when conditions were often anxious and difficult, and my appreciation of the help she always gave my wife and myself in the many projects in which we were interested which had for their object the improvement of the conditions of all classes of the people in that Province. May I, therefore, be allowed to add my tribute to the many she will receive from others, and express the very sincere hope that she may be long spared to help in guiding India on sound and constitutional lines to her goal of responsible government."

XXV

THE BACK OF BEYOND

DURING all this Indian work Mrs Besant's activities on behalf of Theosophy were scarcely abated; indeed these two lines of work constantly interacted, and the more strictly Theosophical episodes that follow had considerable repercussions on Mrs Besant's Indian work, as we shall see. To gain a proper perspective we must for a moment retrace our steps as far back as 1884. In that year one Charles Webster Leadbeater, a country curate of the same age as Mrs Besant, met Mme Blavatsky, left the Church and followed her to India, where he devoted himself more particularly to the education of boys.

After five years he had already acquired a considerable occult reputation, and when A. P. Sinnett, a prominent Anglo-Indian and Theosophist, was returning to London he wanted to take Mr Leadbeater with him to show those at home the kind of marvels they were privileged to experience in India. As a polite way of paying Mr Leadbeater's expenses he asked him to tutor his young son. Mr Leadbeater made it a condition that he should take with him a Sinhalese boy whom the Masters had entrusted to him for educating. This was Kuruppumullagē

THE BACK OF BEYOND

Jinarājādāsa, afterwards a prominent Theosophist and easily the ablest and most level-headed of the younger generation of Theosophical leaders; he is, incidentally, the only one of Mr Leadbeater's many boy pupils, apart from Mr Krishnamurti, who has in any way justified the prophecies of their teacher. Mr Sinnett agreed, and the party left for England.

Little is known of Mr Leadbeater's early movements in England, except that he continued to teach boys and to claim extended occult powers. In a few years, Mrs Besant having in the meanwhile joined the Society, Mr Leadbeater had become well known as a sort of higher Theosophical medium, through whom all sorts of wonders were alleged to occur. Mrs Besant at once installed him in the Avenue Road house, financial arrangements separating him from Mr Sinnett. Very soon he acquired considerable influence over her, accompanying her on lecture tours so that he might pour his occult powers into her as she lectured. We are reminded of Chakravarti, whom, indeed, Mr Leadbeater eventually displaced in Mrs Besant's regard.

Soon Mr Leadbeater announced that he was able to see thought-forms and the true nature of the elements, to read the past and future lives of human beings, and the like wonders. He had no difficulty in persuading Mrs Besant that she too possessed these gifts, for Mr Leadbeater is above all a man of consummate tact. Here is Mrs Besant's account of the incident. As Mr Leadbeater was "looking" at the elements Mrs Besant remarked casually:

“‘I should like to do that.’

“‘Why don’t you?’

“‘Because I don’t know how.’

“He answered in his characteristic direct way,

“‘Try.’

“So I said very solemnly—and I thought about having a will—I said,

“‘Well, I am going to try to see.’

“And in a few minutes I saw an interesting bundle, like a sort of bale of cord around the middle and another cord going the other way. And I said to him,

“‘Well, I see something,’ and I gave the description. All he said was,

“‘That is carbon.’

“‘I said, ‘If you say it, I am quite ready to believe it.’ I was not quite prepared to see all the elements looking like a bale intended for travel by a railway train.

“‘Well,’ he said, ‘that is a fairly easy one to see, but now go on.’ So then, I went on. And I found out how it was quite possible by the use of etheric sight to see just above the limit of our ordinary vision. We examined a large number of chemical elements and drew diagrams with the definite purpose of showing that such a power as clairvoyance existed.”

Clearly, if Mr Leadbeater and Mrs Besant possessed such powers, it was the simplest thing in the world to demonstrate them in a scientific and convincing manner, making a contribution of paramount importance to science and gaining immortal glory for themselves. But occultists are taught to disdain

THE BACK OF BEYOND

such considerations, and the two occult investigators duly disdained them. They made no attempt to convince, but merely incorporated their faculties and statements into the ever-growing body of Theosophical authoritarian dogmas. Years later Mr Jinarājadāsa described how he and Bertram Keightley would accompany the two clairvoyants into the garden, where these would stretch themselves on their backs and dictate their visions to the young men. Mr Leadbeater took the lead, Mrs Besant's function being largely corroborative.

In this way it was discovered that thoughts have definite shapes and colours, though these shapes and colours are not, of course, physical, but restricted to the astral and mental planes. These forms are subject to definite laws, and, in general, to the following principles:

1. Quality of thought determines colour.
2. Nature of thought determines form.
3. Definiteness of thought determines clearness of outline.

The meaning of some of the colours is fairly obvious. Thus it is not surprising to find that red denotes anger, black malice, and grey depression. But some of the other colours can be understood only on purely occult lines. All shades of blue denote religious feelings, "pallid grey-blue" representing so precise a notion as "fetish-worship tinged with fear." Yellow denotes intellect, orange pride or ambition, green sympathy, and so on. These

researches were pursued in considerable detail and pictures were published of, for instance, a shipwreck, a funeral, intellectual aspirations, listening to Gounod, Wagner, and the like.

Still more remarkable was the discovery that the clairvoyant faculty, when exercised by persons so highly-developed as Mr Leadbeater and Mrs Besant, were hypermicroscopic. Using this highly valuable property Mr Leadbeater began to inspect the chemical elements. This method of investigation has obvious advantages, since it does not require any scientific knowledge in the clairvoyant, nor even any specimens of the elements observed. All the clairvoyant has to do is to put himself into a suitable state and to report what he sees. The nature of this state, the methods of procuring it, the means of directing the attention to particular elements, these naturally are mysteries hidden from the commonalty, who suppose them to be revealed only in the higher grades of the E.S., a supposition which may be treated with the greatest reserve.

It was discovered that any gaseous chemical atom is capable of being dissociated four successive times, the last dissociation yielding the ultimate physical atom. These ultimate atoms are of two kinds, male and female; through the former force enters the physical plane from the astral, through the latter the process is reversed. Each atom is a slightly flattened sphere with a heartlike depression through which the force proceeds; for Theosophy is nothing if not anthropomorphic, shaped after the image of

THE BACK OF BEYOND

man. A positive and a negative atom when brought into juxtaposition from a molecule. Matter is observable in five states: elemental, proto-elemental, meta-proto-elemental, hyper-meta-proto-elemental, and atomic. Such are the bare outlines of occult chemistry, a subtle mixture of the contents of orthodox text-books and of higher teaching.

It is only necessary to add the description of a specific element, resulting from occult inspection. In chlorine, we are told, "the general form is that of the dumb-bell, the lower and upper parts of each consisting of twelve funnels, six sloping upwards and six downwards, the funnels radiating outwards from a central globe, and these two parts being united by a connecting rod. The funnel . . . is a somewhat complicated structure, of the same type as that in sodium, the difference consisting in the addition of one more globe, containing nine additional atoms. The central globe is the same as in sodium, but the connecting rod differs. We have here a regular arrangement of five globes, containing three, four, five, four, three atoms respectively," etc., etc.

The plain members of the Theosophical Society, content enough to accept this stuff on the bare assertion of the two leaders, nevertheless found it rather boring. And it was not long before Mr Leadbeater hit upon a really brilliant idea: he, and of course Mrs Besant, would trace the past lives of a group of specially privileged members. Can one not imagine the thrill produced in many a pious bosom by this announcement? How eagerly they

MRS ANNIE BESANT

must have competed to be included! What opportunities for retrospective gossip, extending over thousands of centuries! I have myself heard such remarks as, "That——, she's no better than she was in the twenty-fifth life [*i.e.* 18,209 B.C.]" The idea was immensely successful, and soon histories of various members of the Society, disguised under classical, star, and other names, began to appear. At first the identity of the various people was kept secret to the E.S., but gradually the information was allowed to leak upwards into public print. Now there is a long list available, including Mme Blavatsky—Vajra, Colonel Olcott—Ulysses, Mrs Besant—Herakles, Mr Leadbeater—Sirius, Mr Krishnamurti—Alcyone, etc.¹ We shall return to this in the next section.

Forty-eight successive lives have been investigated and described in this way (apart from a series of, as it were, prehistoric lives). The first dates from 70,000 B.C. and the scene is situated in the Gobi Sea; in the tenth life we arrive at 29,700 B.C. and Persia; in the twentieth at 21,467 B.C. and India; and so on. The last life fully investigated was in A.D. 624 in India. In each life the sex of the individual is given, the names of his spouse, children, brothers, etc., and

¹ Besides the published lists still longer ones have been privately circulated among privileged members of the E. S. I was informed by several members of the E. S. independently, when I was myself a member of it, that my name appears on these private lists. As I was either not yet born or at best a child when these lists were compiled, this fact, if it is a fact, is curious. But no doubt this was merely a stock piece of E. S. propaganda or of what the Americans elegantly call "come hither."

THE BACK OF BEYOND

the events of the life are described in considerable detail, as we shall see.

Clearly no biography of Mrs Besant would be complete which restricted itself to one life only, and so we must now proceed to a brief account of her previous existences, as investigated by Mr Leadbeater and Mrs Besant herself.

XXVI

ON STEPPING-STONES

It is difficult for the biographer of Mrs Besant to strike the happy mean between blind acceptance and obstinate incredulity. The present subject is a case in point. Normally the biographer, finding that his subject is alleged to have had previous lives, would probably dismiss the claim in a satirical footnote. Here, however, matters are rather different, for here the claim is made by Mrs Besant herself and made from what is alleged to be personal investigation and knowledge. If the claim were blindly accepted the present section would obviously be placed at the beginning of the book alongside an account of Mrs Besant's known physical ancestry; if it were wholly rejected a few ironical lines would suffice.

In my view both these attitudes would be wrong. A view held sincerely and with conviction by Mrs Besant about herself, and embodied by her in a series of volumes, while it need not necessarily be accepted, does at least deserve to be fully described in a biography of her. It is, therefore, the object of this section to give, in conjunction with a survey of her clairvoyant work generally, a summary account of Mrs Besant's evolution as clairvoyantly investigated and described by her and Mr Leadbeater in a series

ON STEPPING-STONES

of articles and in several books, chief of which are *Man: Whence, How and Whither* (1913) and *The Lives of Alcyone* (1924).¹

As mentioned in an earlier section, the persons whose past lives have been investigated have been given assumed names to facilitate continuous reference and identification. The identities hidden by these names have been published in only a few cases;² others are known only in the Esoteric Section; others still only to the clairvoyants themselves; and yet others not even to them. For the reader's convenience I will now give a key to some of the more interesting personalities who will be referred to in the following pages:

Alcyone	= Mr Krishnamurti
Brihat	= The Master Jesus
Corona	= Julius Caesar
Deneb	= The 10th Earl of Dundonald
Herakles	= Mrs Besant
Lyra	= Lao-Tze
The Mahaguru	= The Buddha
Mars	= The Master Morya
Mercury	= The Master Koot Hoomi
Mizar	= Mr Nityananda
Neptune	= The Master Hilarion
Sirius	= Mr Leadbeater
Surya	= The Supreme Head of the World
Ulysses	= H S Olcott
Vajra	= Mme Blavatsky

¹ The reader is warned that he will have some difficulty in following parts of this section if he has skipped that on Theosophy

² Thus the interest of the reader is continuously provoked. One of the most interesting puzzles is that presented by the personality of *Scorpio*, who, throughout the "lives", is almost invariably cast in the villain's rôle. One might say, if the expression were not unsuitable, that he is systematically persecuted. It would be exceedingly interesting to know who is represented by this pseudonym

MRS ANNIE BESANT

Mrs Besant traced back her life-stream to the fourth globe of the first round of the first chain of our scheme of evolution. Her life then animated the mineral world, rising to the vegetable world in the second chain. On the fourth globe of the fifth round of the third chain, that of the Moon, in our scheme of evolution, Mrs Besant had risen to be a monkey-like creature, and on leaving this globe she was individualized, that is, became human. The critical episode is thus described: "There is a hut in which dwells a Moon-man, his wife and children; these we know in later times under the names of Mars and Mercury, the Mahaguru and Surya. A number of these monkey-creatures live round the hut, and give to their owners the devotion of faithful dogs; among them we notice the future Sirius, Herakles, Alcyone and Mizar, to whom we may give their future names for the purpose of recognition, though they are still non-human. Their astral and mental bodies have grown under the play of their owners' human intelligence, as those of domesticated animals now develop under our own; Sirius is devoted chiefly to Mercury, Herakles to Mars; Alcyone and Mizar are passionately attached servants of the Mahaguru and Surya.

"One night there is an alarm; the hut is surrounded by savages, supported by their domesticated animals, fierce and strong, resembling furry lizards and crocodiles. The faithful guardians spring up around their masters' hut and fight desperately in its defence; Mars comes out and drives back the assailants, using

ON STEPPING-STONES

some weapon they do not possess; but, while he drives them backward, a lizard-like creature darts behind him into the hut, and catching up the child Surya, begins to carry him away. Sirius springs at him, bears him down, and throws the child to Alcyone, who carries him back into the hut, while Sirius grapples with the lizard, and after a desperate struggle, kills it, falling senseless, badly mangled, over its body. Meanwhile a savage slips behind Mars and stabs at his back, but Herakles, with one leap, flings himself between his master and the weapon, and receives the blow full on his breast, and falls, dying. The savages are now flying in all directions, and Mars, feeling the fall of some creature against his back, staggers, and, recovering himself, turns. He recognizes his faithful animal defender, bends over his dying servant, and places his head in his lap.

"The poor monkey lifts his eyes, full of intense devotion, to his master's face, and the *act* of service done, with passionate desire to save, calls down a stream of response from the Will aspect of the Monad in a fiery rush of power, and in the very moment of dying the monkey individualizes, and thus he dies—a man."

Mrs Besant was first born into human form on the fourth globe of the sixth round of the Moon chain. There she was a savage, leading warlike expeditions and nursing a wounded man. Passing over several million years we come to the fourth root-race (Atlantean) of the fourth globe of the fourth round

MRS ANNIE BESANT

of the fourth chain, that of the Earth, from which it will be perceived, as all these things go in sevens, how intensely anthropocentric is Theosophy. Mrs Besant appears first to have incarnated on earth about 600,000 B.C., when she formed one of a ship-load of egos brought to the earth at that time from the Nirvana in which individualized egos spend their time between each chain-period. She was born into the family of Surya and Mercury, in the Tlavatli sub-race. Again passing over a long period, this time of not more than 380,000 years, we come to the City of the Golden Gates, of which Mars was the Emperor. Vajra was the crown prince, and among his soldiers we find Herakles. After this, we are told, the lives of Herakles "were not remarkable in any way for a long time. They were spent in fighting, when the body was that of a man, in having very numerous babies when it was that of a woman." In 100,000 B.C. Corona was the Emperor of the City of the Golden Gates, and Mars a general under him; Herakles was the general's wife.

Proceeding to our own root-race, we may pass over the first few lives of Herakles. In the second, Arabian, sub-race we find Herakles the ruler of a province in a South African empire, under Mars. In 30,000 B.C. Mrs Besant had reached the third, Iranian, sub-race. She was then "a strong good-looking young man, arriving at the City of the Bridge in a caravan from Mesopotamia, his birthplace; he was dolichocephalous, an Akkadian of pure blood. He had joined the caravan from a mere spirit of

ON STEPPING-STONES

adventure, the desire of high-spirited youth to see the world, and certainly had not the faintest idea that he had been sent to Mesopotamia to take birth, and was being drawn back to Central Asia to rejoin his old friends in their accustomed pioneer work. He was immensely attracted by the beauty and splendour of the ancient and ordered civilization into which he came, and promptly anchored himself therein by falling in love with Orion, a daughter of Sirius.

"This proceeding was frowned upon by Sirius and his wife Mizar, for Sirius was a younger son of Vaivasvata Manu and Mercury, and he disapproved of the introduction of a young Akkadian into his family circle. But a hint from his Father was enough to ensure his compliance, for he was, as ever, promptly obedient to authority, and the Manu was at once his Father and his King. In order to comply with the law which the Manu Himself had established, it was necessary that Herakles should be adopted into an Aryan family, so he was accepted into that of Osiris, an older brother of Sirius."

Leaping over another ten thousand years, we find ourselves at Salem, in India. Here Mars ruled and Herakles was a trusted adviser and captain under him until he had a difference of opinion with his ruler, resigned, and was appointed the governor of a distant province. Eventually he seceded altogether and founded a separate kingdom.

In another ten thousand years later we are provisionally back again in Atlantis, in the great island of

MRS ANNIE BESANT

Poseidonis. Herakles was the wife of Neptune and the mother of several children, including Alcyone. In this life Herakles appears to have been chiefly distinguished for a large collection of legends, "enough to make a modern folk-lorist green with envy." This was about 9650 B.C.

So the story proceeds steadily from century to century, and it would be only wearisome to trace in detail the long succession of lives. It is worth mentioning that in A.D. 350 Mrs Besant was incarnated as Hypatia, and in the sixteenth century as Giordano Bruno. The rest of the story, since about 70,000 B.C., can most conveniently be told in the form of a table, which I have been at pains to compile from the voluminous clairvoyant records of Mrs Besant and Mr Leadbeater.

ON STEPPING-STONES

<i>Approximate date</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Status, etc.</i>	<i>Name of Father</i>	<i>Name of Mother</i>	<i>Name of Husband or Wife</i>
B C						
70,000	Gobi Sea	Male	—	Mars	Mercury	Mizar
70,000	Gobi Sea	Male	—	Mars	Dhruva	Aurora
60,000	Manoa	Female	—	Manu	Surya	Vajra
42,000	Gobi Sea	Male	King	Corona	Theo	Sirius
40,000	Manoa and Arabia	Female	Queen	—	—	Mars
38,000	Mashonaland	Male	Emperor	Mars	Venus	Ulysses
32,000	Central Asia	Male	Envoy	—	—	Orion
31,100	Central Asia	Male	Prince	Jupiter	Dhruva	Saturn
30,200	Central Asia and Persia	Male	Aide-de-camp	Mars	Neptune	Psyche
29,700	Persia	Male	—	Proteus	Lyra	Hector
28,800	Persia	Female	Queen	—	—	Neptune
28,100	Manoa	Female	Queen	Diana	Judea	Mars
27,500	Ireland	Female	Princess	Mars	Vesta	Lyra
26,800	Manoa	Male	King	Mars	Vajra	Capella
26,100	Mongolia	Male	Prince	Calyx	Clio	Orpheus
25,500	New Zealand	Male	—	Rector	Lyra	Albireo
24,700	Mexico	Male	Prince	Selene	Alcyone	Ulysses
23,700	N. America	Male	Prince	Rama	Elektra	Achilles

MRS ANNIE BESANT

<i>Approximate date</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Status, etc.</i>	<i>Name of Father</i>	<i>Name of Mother</i>	<i>Name of Husband or Wife</i>
B.C.	Mississippi	Male	King's son-in-law	Mizar	Helios	Bee
22,700	India	Female	—	Sylla	Echo	Mercury
21,900	S. India	Female	Queen	—	—	Alcyone
21,400	S. India	Male	King	Alcyone	Percy	Gem
20,600	China	Male	King	—	—	Brihat
19,500	Central Asia	Male	King	Mars	Mercury	Capella
18,900	Algeria	Male	Head of a university	Alcyone	Helios	Aurora
18,200						
17,500	Central Asia and India	Male	King	Mars	Neptune	Cetus
16,900	Poseidonis	Male	King	Mars	Lutea	Saturn
16,000	Central Asia and India	Female	Queen	Mercury	Saturn	Jupiter
15,400	Oudh	Female	—	Mars	Vulcan	Mercury
14,500	Oudh	Female	—	Aldeb	Brihat	Helios
13,600	Poseidonis	Female	Queen	Sirius	Alcyone	Albed
12,900	Punjab	Female	Princess	Mars	Saturn	Polaris
12,100	Peru	Female	Princess	Pindar	Tolosa	Castor
11,200	N. India	Female	—	—	—	Adrona
10,700	China	Male	High-Priest	—	—	Arcor
10,400	Bengal	Female	—	—	—	Yajna
9,700	N. Poseidonis	Female	—	Capella	Bee	Neptune

ON STEPPING-STONES

<i>Approximate date</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Status, etc</i>	<i>Name of Father</i>	<i>Name of Mother</i>	<i>Name of Husband or Wife</i>
B.C.						
8,800	Mysore	Female	—	Jerome	—	Naga
8,300	Etruria	Male	—	—	Sif	Pollux
7,800	Peshawar	Female	—	—	—	Viraj
7,000	Egypt	Male	Prince	Mars	Vulcan	(1) Lutea (2) Naga
6,300	Central India	Male	King	Ajax	Andro	Apollo
5,600	Kathawar	Male	Temple officiant	Saturn	Jupiter	Bee
5,000	N India	Male	Holy man	Mercury	Olaf	Gem
4,000	Egypt	Female	—	Saturn	Venus	Mercury
3,400	India	Female	Princess	Mars	Viraj	Vajra
2,800	Crete	Female	Queen	Ushas	Maya	Mars
2,200	Nagpur	Female	—	Mars	Athena	Brihat
600	Rajagriha	Male	Prince and Buddhist missionary	Mars	Vajra	Kos
A.D.						
250	Norway	Female	"White Lady" [Ghost?]	—	—	—
350	Alexandria	Female	Hypatia	—	—	—
400	India	Female	—	Mars	—	—
1550	Italy	Male	Giordano Bruno	—	—	—
1847	England	Female	Annie Wood (Besant)	—	—	—

XXVII

“EARTHLY, SENSUAL, DEVILISH”¹

WHEN Mr Leadbeater had first gone to India in 1885 to teach boys, rumours soon arose about his relations with his pupils. From that time to this these rumours have never ceased, and from time to time they have exploded in the form of definite accusations. Here we are concerned with these things only so far as they affect Mrs Besant, whose record in regard to them can only be described as incomprehensible. Mrs Besant's attention was first drawn to the matter in 1905. Mr Leadbeater had been lecturing in America and, of course, giving special attention to the training of boys. The usual rumours arose, and at last someone took action.

In January 1906 an American Theosophist, Mrs Dennis, wrote to Mrs Besant in regard to the hatred her son had formed for Mr Leadbeater. “It is not, as I supposed, a childish and personal grievance, but as you will see from the charges and evidence formulated below, was the result of morally criminal acts on the part of Mr Leadbeater himself.” In the present state of the law it is unfortunately impossible

¹ I wish to make it explicitly clear that I am not here concerned with homosexuality, a difficult and complex subject which does not lend itself to summary treatment. I am here concerned only with the particular sexuality alleged to be manifested in Mr Leadbeater's life.

"EARTHLY, SENSUAL, DEVILISH"

to go into these charges in detail. With a brief omission the American Society formulated these three charges:

"First, that he is teaching young boys given into his care habits of . . . demoralizing personal practices.

"Second, that he does this with deliberate intent and under the guise of occult training or with the promise of increase of physical manhood.

"Third, that he has demanded, at least in one case, promise of the utmost secrecy."

The evidence adduced by Mrs Dennis cannot be published,¹ but one of the most telling items is the remark of one of the boys, who said: "Mother, I think that was the worst part of the whole thing. Somehow, he made me believe it was Theosophical!" That is really the head and substance of the present writer's charge against Mr Leadbeater: not so much that he practised certain things but that he did so in the guise of occult and religious training.

When the charge reached Mrs Besant, Mr Leadbeater was with her, and his influence can be seen in her reply. She fully accepted his repeated assertion that his action had been justified on occult grounds, and wrote to Mrs Dennis of him: "I know

¹ I regret the necessity for keeping the reader in the dark, in my opinion plain speaking is always preferable. The law being what it is I content myself with quoting, in the original cipher, a passage from a letter alleged to have been written by Mr Leadbeater to one of his boy pupils. "Eg eu dinat xeuuou iamq ia oaaet socceoh nisa iguao Cau ouu uu iguao, is ia xemm ouu dina xamm Eiat uuuu iugqao xiao zio usa utmaaq; tell me fully Hmuc taotuueio et ti qmautuou Unotuoe lettat eusmeoh"

MRS ANNIE BESANT

him better than you can do, and am absolutely certain of his good faith and pure intent, though I disagree with the advice he has, *in rare cases*, given to boys approaching manhood." When the American Society demanded at least an inquiry, Mrs Besant wrote: "This I know, Mr Leadbeater to be a disciple of Master K.H. I have constantly met him out of the body and seen him with the Master and trusted their work. I know that if he were evil-minded this could not be. I cannot therefore join in hounding him out of the T.S., in which he has been one of our best workers."

But this time not even Mrs Besant could stem the tide; the American Society had already sent a Commissioner to England, to lay the matter before Olcott. The latter appointed a Committee, of which G. R. S. Mead and Bertram Keightley were members, and before which Mr Leadbeater was summoned to appear. Before the Committee met he wrote out a resignation, and it soon became apparent that this would be needed. It is clear from a verbatim report of the proceedings that Mr Leadbeater tried hard to minimize the gravity of the charges; but the evidence was such that he could not wholly deny them. He consequently fell back on his usual course, and defended them on occult grounds. Here is a typical passage from the proceedings:

"LEADBEATER: You are probably not aware that one at least of the great Church organizations for young men deals with the matter in the same manner.

"EARTHLY, SENSUAL, DEVILISH"

MEAD: Do you deliberately say this?

LEADBEATER: Yes.

MEAD AND BURNETT: What is its name?

LEADBEATER: I am not free to give this. I heard of the matter first through it.

MEAD: Mr Leadbeater states then that there is an organization of the Church of England which teaches self-abuse?

OLCOTT: Is it a seminary for young priests or a school?

LEADBEATER: It is not a school but I must not give definite indications.

OLCOTT: Is it found in the Catholic Church?

LEADBEATER: I expect so.

OLCOTT: I know that in Italy Garibaldi found many terrible things.

MEAD: This last statement of Mr Leadbeater is one of the most extraordinary things I have ever heard. It is incredible to me that there is an organization of the Church of England which teaches masturbation as a preventive against unchastity. I ask, what is the name of this organization?

LEADBEATER: I certainly should not tell.

MEAD: I understand that it is an organization pledged to secrecy and I take it that Mr Leadbeater received his first information from this organization.

LEADBEATER: I suppose it would have been better if I had not mentioned it.

MEAD: I absolutely refuse to believe that this is so.

LEADBEATER: I decline to prove it in any manner."

MRS ANNIE BESANT

The feeling aroused in the Committee by Mr Leadbeater can be judged from this observation by the highly-respected and judicious Bertram Keightley: "Unless in some public manner the Society is informed that Mr Leadbeater is no longer a member, he will be visiting Branches and giving lectures and picking up boys, as he has done in the past. I cannot leave this room satisfied until I know that no member can be taken unawares."

Finally the thirteen members of the Committee unanimously passed the following resolution: "That having considered certain charges against Mr Leadbeater and having listened to his explanation, the Committee recommend the acceptance by the President Founder of Mr Leadbeater's resignation already offered in anticipation of the Committee's decision."

Immediately this decision had been recorded Mr Leadbeater sent Mrs Besant a long cablegram full of self-pity and charges of conspiracy; it concluded thus: "Technically my resignation from the T.S. removes me from the E.S. But I can answer questions in unofficial capacity as friend." Mr Leadbeater thus began his exceedingly subtle campaign for reinstatement. For what does this remark mean? Mr Leadbeater knew that without him Mrs Besant's clairvoyant researches, extra-corporeal meetings with lofty entities, and the whole structure of Theosophical occult practices, could not be maintained. Thus he gave Mrs Besant a plain hint that he was aware of her dependence on

“EARTHLY, SENSUAL, DEVILISH”

him. Mrs Besant took the hint, and we find her answering Mr Leadbeater's cable in a remarkable letter in which, among other things, she declares her intention of excluding from the Esoteric Section all who took part in “this insane action.”

Soon, however, Mrs Besant perceived the strength of the feeling against Mr Leadbeater, and she also received copies of the evidence against him. At once the tone of her letters to Mr Leadbeater changed and that of Mr Leadbeater became more forced and pleading. By August Mrs Besant had made up her mind against Mr Leadbeater, and she wrote: “Any proposal to reinstate Mr Leadbeater in the membership of the T.S. would be ruinous to the Society. It would be indignantly repudiated here and in Europe, and I am sure in Australia and New Zealand, if the facts were known. If such a proposal were carried in America—I do not believe it possible—I should move on the T.S. Council, the supreme authority, that the application of membership should be rejected.” And in a letter to the Esoteric Section, afterwards printed, Mrs Besant added of Mr Leadbeater's practices, “Worst of all that it should be taught under the name of Divine Wisdom, being essentially ‘earthly, sensual, devilish!’” Mrs Besant concluded that Mr Leadbeater had fallen victim to “glamour,” and began strongly to suspect that her own experiences with him had been due to a similar cause.

Mr Leadbeater was not defeated. He continued to write to Mrs Besant in the manner most likely to

MRS ANNIE BESANT

appeal to her. "I need not remind you," he wrote, ingenuously, "of our long work together, of the hundreds of times that we have met out of the body, and even in the presence of our Masters and of the Lord himself." After much in this strain, he goes on, "Well, the thing is done now, and with all the might of your worldwide authority I am branded as a fallen person." "Do not think from the above that I am repining or blaming you in any way. So long as our friendship remains, opinions are a matter of minor importance. I trust you absolutely, knowing that you will always do, and are now doing, what seems to you your duty." Mrs Besant still replied coldly, and we find Mr Leadbeater in letter after letter insisting on the reality of the Masters, for Mrs Besant had begun to doubt even this cardinal doctrine, after having asserted on literally thousands of occasions that she was absolutely and utterly convinced of their reality from personal knowledge, experience, and intercourse.

If the slightest doubt remained that after the death of Mme Blavatsky Mrs Besant was dependent on Mr Leadbeater for her belief in the Masters, such a passage as the following would clinch the matter. "The only question on which we differ," wrote Mr Leadbeater in October 1906, "is as to whether my testimony to the existence of the Masters is true; I cannot but maintain that it is because it is at this moment part of my daily life just as much as ever; you on the other hand maintain in your circular that it is not, and that we have both been

“ EARTHLY, SENSUAL, DEVILISH ”

for many years simultaneously deceived. . . . Myself I am thoroughly convinced that we have not been deceived, and that the Masters are realities. I know that you believe this too, yet you somehow think that my testimony to them is a delusion. . . . ”

There now occurred an episode which would be incredible in any other atmosphere, but which somehow seems natural in the hothouse of Theosophy. The aged Colonel Olcott, who had ever since the foundation of the Society been treated with contempt by the effective leaders, H.P.B., A.B., and C.W.L. (as they are invariably called by Theosophists), had nevertheless maintained by his very simplicity and naïve honesty an air of reality in the fairy structure of Theosophy; thus the Committee of the Society for Psychical Research believed him to be honest, could not believe that he was so colossally foolish as he appeared, and thus were at first impressed by his testimony. Colonel Olcott had not hesitated to judge Mr Leadbeater and to expel from the Society, soon after, the latter's disciple, Mr Jinarājadāsa. Now, in January 1907, the Colonel lay on his deathbed, and from it he wrote an amazing letter to the man whom he had, in effect, removed from the Society on overwhelmingly proved evidence of immoral conduct.

The Colonel wrote that the Mahatmas had several times visited him recently in their physical bodies, for they had wanted to clear up the dispute as to glamour. They had assured him that they were *not* due to glamour. The Masters also told Olcott

that he had been right in his inquiry and in demanding Mr Leadbeater's resignation, and that Mr Leadbeater's teachings were wrong. Then the Colonel goes on, incredibly, "Because I have always cherished for you a sincere affection, I wish to beg your pardon, and to tell you before I die that I am sorry any fault of judgement on my part should have caused you such deep sorrow and mortification." Olcott then proceeds to beg Mr Leadbeater to give up his teaching and to become reconciled with the Society.

What is the explanation of this document? As I hope I have shown I strongly dislike theorizing where there is no direct evidence. But in this case I do not hesitate to make a suggestion which appears to me warranted by the general facts of the case and the logic of the situation. It is my opinion that Colonel Olcott, seeing that Mrs Besant would be his successor in the Presidency, knowing also that she could not maintain her occult ascendancy without Mr Leadbeater's help, and realizing that this fact and the existing dissensions would ruin his beloved Theosophical Society, deliberately told a series of lies and posthumously humiliated himself by making a monstrous apology, for the sole purpose of maintaining the existence of the Society.

If this was Colonel Olcott's intention, he must have been happy, in the higher planes, to know how completely it was fulfilled. Soon after his death, when Mrs Besant was in process of being elected President, a lengthy business in a Society extending over many parts of the world, she received the

“EARTHLY, SENSUAL, DEVILISH ”

following cable from the Blavatsky Lodge of London: “Would you as President permit Mr Leadbeater re-admission?” To this Mrs Besant replied: “If publicly repudiates teaching, two years after repudiation, on large majority request of whole Society, would reinstate, otherwise not.”

The drama only now unfolds itself in its full intricacy. It is scarcely possible to tell the story without stringing together strong adjectives and exclamations, but the effort must be made. It is of course a commonplace that in election pledges the accent is on the election and not on the pledge. But is it unreasonable to expect a higher standard from those whose every action is directed by lofty spiritual purposes? The question is rhetorical and need not be answered. All that concerns us is that Mrs Besant had given her pledge in fair and unequivocal terms, and, having given it, was duly elected. One of her first acts was to reinstate Mr Jinārājādāsa; this might possibly be regarded as not a breach of the letter of the pledge. But subsequently published documents show that at almost exactly the same moment as she gave the pledge Mrs Besant had done far worse. She had written to an American physician, Dr Weller Van Hook, that the Master had instructed her to defend Mr Leadbeater, and she practically instructed Dr Van Hook to undertake the task, suggesting “certain lines” to him. Simultaneously H.P.B. took the matter in hand from higher spheres and gave Dr Van Hook “a strong impulse.” The next step was that

Alexander Fullerton, the Secretary of the American Theosophical Society, who had led the demand for an inquiry into Mr Leadbeater's conduct, was got rid of after a bitter campaign, and Dr Van Hook was appointed in his place.

At this point the Master M. came to Dr Van Hook and dictated three long letters to him in defence of Mr Leadbeater; these letters were published at first over Dr Van Hook's own name, but their supernal source was an open secret and was soon openly acknowledged. These documents have been described as "downright Theosophical impudence," and to this judgement I subscribe. Now hectoring, now imploring, now calling on divine sanctions, now appealing to the "impartial and unprejudiced man of the world" (an odd court for divinity to seek), the gist of the whole letters is that Mr Leadbeater should be reinstated. A command from such a source could not be ignored; resolutions began to come in; Mr Leadbeater was appointed Assistant Editor of an American Theosophical journal (he, the Arhat, who then stood on and has since passed over the threshold of divinity!); and in 1908 the matter came up before the Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society in England. Herbert Burrows, a devoted friend of Mrs Besant ever since the days of the matchgirls' strike, led the opposition to the proposal that Mr Leadbeater should be reinstated, and he won the day by a vote in the proportion of over nine to one. The English Society consequently asked Mrs Besant to close the matter

"EARTHLY, SENSUAL, DEVILISH"

by making a decisive statement. Mrs Besant responded with a long and evasive statement from every line of which emerges the set intention to reinstate Mr Leadbeater at the earliest opportunity.

The English Society observed that their "serious and earnest appeal to safeguard the good name of the Society and to assist in preserving Theosophy from harm, the President now rejects with all her strength. Mrs Besant's reply now takes the form of special pleading in defence of Mr Leadbeater; she withdraws her former unequivocal phrases; humbly apologizes to him; and finally invites the Society to vote for Mr Leadbeater's triumphant reinstatement without further guarantee. The change in Mrs Besant's attitude is amazing, but still more astonishing is her forgetfulness of her emphatic pledges given to the Society at the time of her election to the Presidency." The English Society enlarged on this theme in a long, closely-reasoned and studiously moderate statement. Nothing availed; Mrs Besant needed Mr Leadbeater, and she duly reinstated him, careless of protest and careless of the loss by resignation of several thousand members. Mr Leadbeater went to India, the two Initiates swore that nothing more would ever come between them, and the occult investigations began again with renewed vigour and with unprecedented boldness.

To round off this part of the story it is only necessary to add that recently Dr Weller Van Hook has repudiated his three letters, not merely on behalf of the Masters, but also on his own behalf. As in

MRS ANNIE BESANT

this instance, the various episodes in the picaresque romance of Theosophy are often so plainly ludicrous that long before one comes to the climax one finds it hardly possible to summon up any moral indignation at the spectacle of such wholesale folly and deception.

XXVIII

HIS MASTER'S VOICE

Thus welcomed back to the Theosophical fold Mr Leadbeater joined Mrs Besant, most loyal of friends, at Adyar. He lost no time in consolidating his position once and for all. For many years past vague rumours had been current in the Theosophical Society, and particularly in the E.S., of some coming portent which was to mark the official beginning of the next, sixth sub-race. Some years before there had been announced the reincarnation of Mme Blavatsky into the body of a young Indian lad, who had then suddenly found himself able to speak Russian, French, German, Hebrew. After a few weeks nothing more was heard of this event and finally it was announced that the boy had left for Tibet to be "finished" by the Masters. The process appears to be a long one, for over thirty years have since passed without news from him (or her).

In January 1909 Mrs Besant officially intimated that Mr Leadbeater had been re-admitted into the Theosophical Society. In the same month a Brahmin, Mr Narayaniah, an official of the Society (no less, indeed, than assistant secretary of the E.S.), took up his residence in one of the buildings on the Adyar premises. One day Mr Leadbeater caught sight

MRS ANNIE BESANT

of Narayaniah's two youngest sons bathing in the river, which runs through the grounds. He took them to his bungalow and on further inspection made a most momentous discovery. He discovered that one of the boys, Krishnamurti, was to be the vehicle of the new world-teacher, the Lord Maitreya, one of the loftiest of the Masters, whose last incarnation on earth had been as Christ! Mrs Besant at once accepted and proclaimed the fact.

Soon Mr Leadbeater felt, very naturally, that Krishnamurti was entitled to more comfort and instruction than his father could give him. He proposed that the boy should come and live with him and overwhelmed the father's protests with orders direct from the Masters. Finally Mr Narayaniah formally appointed Mrs Besant the guardian of the two boys. No time was now lost. An Order of the Rising Sun of India was formed with an elaborate hierarchy. The members wore girdles and medallions which were changed in colour as their possessors rose in rank. Events now moved so fast that, according to Mrs Besant, January 1910 witnessed "at the rare conjunction of the planets noted by all astrologers the Occult birth of the young child [*sic*] who in due time shall be the vehicle for the blessing of the world. 2000 years have run their course since a similar gift was vouchsafed to the 'sorrowful star.'"

Exactly a year later there lay at Adyar, again according to Mrs Besant, "carefully guarded" the "empty body of the young disciple taken away to Tibet for his mystic initiation and hither the new



MRS BESANT AND PRIESTS OF THE LIBERAL CATHOLIC CHURCH

HIS MASTER'S VOICE

initiate returned to take up again his dwelling therein to live under the guardianship of his elder brothers until the time is ripe for the ending of their trust." In November of that year 1911 matters came to a head at the annual convention of the Theosophical Society. The Order of the Rising Sun in India had been wound up as the result of the vigorously tactless propaganda of Mr G. S. Arundale, the principal of the Central Hindu College, a position from which he was obliged to retire; he became the young lad's private secretary. A new society, the Order of the Star in the East,¹ was substituted, and during the Theosophical Convention Mr Krishnamurti was to distribute certificates of membership.

What happened then was thus described by Mr Arundale: "The line of members began to pass up the central passage and one or two received their papers with a bow to the Head [Krishnamurti] and a friendly smile from him and then came a sudden and startling change. The whole atmosphere altered

¹ Here is a specimen of the notices sent out at that time over Mr Krishnamurti's name.

"NOTICE

I find that many members of the Order desire to wear a ribbon along with the Star, and it has been decided that when that is done the ribbon shall be blue. At present each country has chosen its own shade of colour, and various kinds are therefore worn. I think it would be desirable that there should be uniformity in this respect, so a large quantity of ribbon of exactly the required shade has been ordered. This has been cut up into pieces nine inches in length, and I have myself magnetized it, so that it is now ready for the use of such members as desire it . . .

J KRISHNAMURTI,
Head "

This ribbon was sold at the wholesale price of 3s per 11 yards or 3 75 francs per 10 metres

and the air was thrown into powerful pulsing vibrations of the most extraordinary force. All saw the young figure draw itself up and take an air of severe and dignified majesty, a stateliness new and strange. The approaching member involuntarily dropped on his knees bowing his head to the ground and the smile shone out radiant, compassionate, tender.

“What else some saw let me now tell. A great coronet of brilliant shimmering blue appeared a foot or so above the young head and from this descended funnel-wise bright streams of blue light till they touched the dark hair, entering and flooding the head. The Lord Maitreya was there embodying Himself in His Chosen. Within the coronet blazed the crimson of the symbol of the Master Jesus, the Rosy Cross, and high in air well-nigh from the roof blazed down a dazzling flashing star which all initiates know. Around, guarding the building within, making as it were a living wall, hung the great green Devas, a quadrangle of coruscating light and colour, glorious, ever-enriching ranks of beauty and joy.” Leaving on one side the fact that most of those present failed to see anything in the least out of the ordinary, this must undoubtedly have been a startling moment.

Next year there took place the disciple's second initiation, and the great event, the permanent occupation of the body of Mr Krishnamurti by the Lord, was expected from day to day, when there occurred a somewhat disturbing event. Mr Narayaniah in his turn formed certain suspicions of Mr Leadbeater and saw and heard certain things.

HIS MASTER'S VOICE

As a result he requested that his sons should be taken out of the keeping of Mr Leadbeater; this Mrs Besant refused to do and as a result he brought an action against her for the recovery of the boys. The suit was heard in March 1913 before Mr Justice Bakewell, Mrs Besant conducting her own defence. She concluded her first address with a peroration which reveals her lack of humour and of a sense of proportion: "My own children," she said, "were taken away by a Court of Law and left motherless and with a cloud over their youth, but they came back to me the moment they were free. These boys will come back to me, if in your Lordship's judgement you think right to take them from my charge, I leave the case in your Lordship's hands, the hands of him who in this High Court represents the justice of God and King, the good name and the honour of my [*sic*] boys."

The Judge held that the plaintiff's evidence was not reliable, but of Mr Leadbeater he said: "Mr Leadbeater admitted in his evidence that he has held, and even now holds, opinions which I need only describe as certainly immoral and such as to unfit him to be the tutor of boys, and taken in conjunction with his professed power to detect the approach of impure thoughts, render him a highly dangerous associate for children." He directed Mrs Besant to restore the boys to their father, but marked his opinion of Narayaniah by ordering him to pay all the costs of both sides. Mrs Besant at once appealed, but without success. On taking the case

to the Privy Council, however, she won on a technical point.

It was a short-lived triumph. Shortly after the whole German Theosophical Society, under the scholar and visionary Rudolf Steiner, seceded from the parent body owing to the deification of Mr Krishnamurti. Steiner and his followers then founded the Anthroposophical Society. Other troubles fell upon her thick and fast, but she met them all with a renewal of her old fighting spirit. Spurned by Madras white society and particularly by such organizations as those of the missionaries and the Y.M.C.A., she founded a Young Men's Indian Association, which prospered and soon owned premises rivalling those of the Y.M.C.A. The Society being torn by internal dissensions Mrs Besant went out and extended it in all directions. Above all she tightened up the inner discipline: the Esoteric Section was purged and made still stricter; an Order of Brothers of Service was initiated, the members of which gave up their earnings to a common pool administered by Mrs Besant, and she formed the Educational Trust, though the Central Hindu College was taken from her.

Mr Leadbeater's peculiar opinions being now public property Mrs Besant took the fight into the enemy's camp by bringing actions against the local newspapers which had accused Mr Leadbeater of being a sexual degenerate; the Judge found against her. Soon after Mr Leadbeater fortunately had a call to Australia, where he remained until recently, when he returned to India. To close this unsavoury

HIS MASTER'S VOICE

element in our story it is enough to say that the usual scandals followed Mr Leadbeater even into the Antipodes and led to new troubles and further widespread secessions.

In the meanwhile Mr Krishnamurti was in England being educated and groomed, and for several years little was heard of or from him except in the intimacy of the E.S. and the Order of the Star in the East. Mrs Besant had learned her lesson and saw that such claims as had been put forward for the vehicle of the reincarnated Christ must be broken gently to the unbelieving world. It was not, indeed, until 1925 that a decisive step was taken. In this year the 'Theosophical Society celebrated its fifty years' Jubilee, and the occasion was celebrated by a great international Convention held at Adyar.

It was obvious from the beginning that something momentous was expected to happen. For long before rumours had been flying to the ends of the earth and mysterious hints from highly placed members of the E.S. roused the eager expectations of the delegates and raised the atmosphere of the Convention, always highly charged, to a fever-pitch. When the delegates arrived they found that Mrs Besant, for many years the central figure on these occasions, had given way to Mr Krishnamurti. It was he whom the delegates now crowded to get a glimpse of, he who occupied the centre of the platform, to him that were made those secret gestures taught in the E.S.

Mr Krishnamurti was in 1925 thirty years of age.

MRS ANNIE BESANT

He was decidedly handsome, of a graceful and athletic, though slender figure, perhaps a shade too carefully dressed, a shade too perfectly groomed, but otherwise, apart from his colour, to all appearances a typical prosperous English young man. His manners were charming, his behaviour unassuming, his discourse undistinguished. The fixed and courteous smile of the man much in the public eye revealed nothing of the thoughts behind it. He was always punctual, came when awaited, spoke when announced, said what was expected. He seemed the perfect and willing tool or vehicle of another's ideas. Yet, with it all, there seemed to be something aloof, reserved, withdrawn in his manner, as if he were acting in a dream, watching quietly yet intently, making mental notes and reservations. The more intelligent Theosophists wondered what exactly he would do when the sacred moment arrived in which the reincarnated Christ was to occupy his body. They were to know in time—but not yet.

The Jubilee Convention had assembled, and in the shadow of the great banyan tree in the grounds of the Adyar headquarters, Mr Krishnamurti was addressing some 3000 assembled delegates. He was speaking of the imminent coming of the World-Teacher. A few of those present were warned what to expect; they communicated their excitement to those around them; and the whole audience was in the sort of state in which the individual is merged in the mass, a revivalist psychology, a group-

HIS MASTER'S VOICE

psychosis. The words of the speaker became more and more urgent. "We are all expecting Him," he said, "He will be with us soon. He is with us now. He comes to those who want, who desire, who long." A pause, and then, with a dramatic change from the third person to the first, the voice went on, "I come to those who want sympathy, who want happiness, who are longing to be released. I come to reform and not to tear down; not to destroy, but to build." The long-awaited moment had at long last arrived; the divine being had finally consecrated his future body by speaking through it.

Afterwards Mrs Besant said that the "voice not heard on earth for 2000 years" had once again been heard. "Some," she continued, "saw the Christ Himself." Soon after Mrs Besant left for London to deliver a series of lectures in Queen's Hall, on *How a World Teacher Comes*. The present writer remembers very vividly the passionate fervour of her peroration and the excitement it roused in the crowded Hall: "And if one of the lowest of his servants tell you that she knows, because she heard Him say it, that he is coming again as the Helper of the world, surely you might at least realize that the question is a grave one. And if you want to study it, the way to you is open. But I would pray to you, for your own sakes, do not ridicule the idea, do not scoff, for in scoffing you are scoffing at Christ Himself——He the ever-loving Saviour, He the Elder Brother of our race, He who should be born in the hearts of every one of you, and growing in you to

MRS ANNIE BESANT

the measure of the full stature of the Christ. At least, if you do not believe, do not encourage the degradation by ridicule of that great message of His coming. Reject Him again when He comes if you will, and then let your civilization go down as others which have gone before.”

XXIX

PER ARDUA AD ASTRA

It will be well briefly to pause here in order to look a little more closely at Mrs Besant's activities at this time. Let us take the year 1927, in which fell Mrs Besant's eightieth birthday, and see how she celebrated the attainment of this milestone in her life. The beginning of the year found her in the United States, where she had just finished a long lecture tour. She travelled to California with Mr Krishnamurti and was delighted with its climate and promise. So much so that she decided to form a community in the Ojai Valley, about 80 miles north of Los Angeles, to prepare for the coming of the World-Teacher. On 11 January an appeal was issued to the public and to the Theosophical Society. She announced, with a certain amount of innocent bathos, that "as a servant of the Great Hierarchy, I eagerly co-operate in Their Plan, even in accordance with cyclic Law, and I have signed an agreement securing a large tract in the Upper Ojai Valley. . . . Who will be the living stones to build it?"

On the same day, 11 January 1927, Mrs Besant presided over a meeting arranged to celebrate the anniversary of the foundation of the Order of the Star. She spoke, and so did Mr Krishnamurti, who

MRS ANNIE BESANT

concluded his address by reading a poem he had recently composed. It ends:

“I am the Truth,
I am the Law,
I am the Refuge,
I am the Guide,
The companion and the beloved.”

And the report of the meeting in *The Theosophist* goes on: “As the last words were uttered there was a sprinkle of light rain, that seemed like a benediction, and, spanning the valley, a perfect rainbow arch shone out.”

Mrs Besant remained in California during nearly the whole spring to see the new enterprise through its early days, and, as usual, successfully. While there she held a Theosophical class every week in the Ojai Valley, Los Angeles, and Hollywood; preached many sermons in the Liberal Catholic Church; delivered a number of lectures in Los Angeles, Hollywood, Pasadena, and Ventura, as well as weekly lectures in Ojai itself; founded a Co-Masonic Lodge; and spoke at numerous Theosophical, Star and kindred functions.

In the late Spring Mrs Besant left for England. At Whitsuntide and after she delivered a number of lectures, presiding over the Annual Conventions of the English and Scottish Theosophical Societies. During June she was in London; every Saturday evening she held a class, every Sunday evening she lectured in the Queen's Hall on “The World-Teacher and the New Civilization,” and in addition

PER ARDUA AD ASTRA

she delivered at least a score of public, semi-public, and private addresses, including several at the Liberal Catholic Church, several in the Co-Masonic temple and one at the Fabian Society. From London Mrs Besant made lecturing excursions to nearby places such as Letchworth. At the end of June she left London and made a lightning ten days' tour to Liverpool, Leeds, Bradford, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, Nottingham, and Bristol, delivering at least two public and two private lectures in each place.

Two days later, having in the meanwhile returned to London, Mrs Besant left for Holland to preside over the Convention of the Dutch Society. After this she spent a few days at the Star Camp at Huizen, with the usual speeches and lectures. The rest of July was spent in England in a Conference on the Commonwealth of India Bill, in a Jubilee Meeting of the Malthusian League, and in the inaugural meeting in England of the Fellowship of Faiths, another of Mrs Besant's adopted infants. The next month or so was spent in a grand tour of Europe. Mrs Besant chartered an aeroplane and visited, travelling by air throughout, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Hungary, Austria, Germany, Holland, France, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and back to England, Wales, and Ireland. In each country she presided at Conventions, delivered public and private lectures, and took part in numerous functions. I estimate that during this tour she spoke on at least one hundred and fifty occasions, and about

MRS ANNIE BESANT

five hundred times throughout the year, of which about two hundred were full-length addresses of not less than an hour.

In October Mrs Besant returned to India and at once resumed her various political and editorial tasks. She made a present of the Indian branch of the Theosophical Publishing House to the Indian Theosophical Society, and presented a pair of dhotis to each of the 114 men employed in the printing works forming part of the Society's headquarters. In the middle of November she left Madras and spent a fortnight in a strenuous political tour of South India, visiting, organizing, and perpetually lecturing, lecturing, lecturing. She was back in Madras on the 26th and left at once for a political conference at Calicut. The rest of the year was comparatively peaceful; beyond editing three or four Theosophical and political journals, administering the complex organization of headquarters, keeping in touch with a thousand and one activities, composing the constant differences between her followers, attending a huge Scout jamboree, presiding at the Indian Theosophical Convention, it must be confessed that Mrs Besant did comparatively little during December.

It must not be supposed that all this work was got through with the help of a large and competent staff. Mrs Besant hardly ever dictated; what she wrote she wrote with her own hands, letters as well as literary work. Her subordinates could never keep pace with her and it was said of her that she wore

PER ARDUA AD ASTRA

out helpers as others wear out pens and pencils. No wonder that she rose at five, was at her desk at seven and stayed there until late at night. It may be doubted whether any woman, possibly even any man, has ever got through a greater volume of sheer hard work during half a century than did Mrs Besant.

XXX

CHALLENGE

WE have seen how intense was the young Annie Wood's susceptibility to the ceremonial trappings of religion, how completely she cast them aside when she became an Atheist, and we have already noted in passing how Mrs Besant gradually fell back into the old ways. The full story, however, has yet to be told. Only a year or two after she first joined the Theosophical Society Mrs Besant joined a French Masonic Lodge, *Le Droit Humain*, which admitted women. Mrs Besant had by now realized that any organization is strong if its innermost council is strong, and she had realized that so long as this inner council was hers, so long would the whole Society be hers. It was for this reason that she was content for so long to leave the Presidency to Olcott while she herself was the Head of the Esoteric Section. And it was for this reason that she organized inner groups, orders of service, brotherhoods of one kind or another, all small and select and all sworn to give her obedience.

Mrs Besant was not slow to realize the potential value of Masonic Lodges from this point of view. Freemasonry she could not hope to convert, apart from its refusal to admit women, so she took up

CHALLENGE

Le Droit Humain, and, under the title of Co-Masonry, introduced it to England. With accustomed speed she became vice-president of the French Lodge and delegate to Great Britain. As such she founded the first Lodge in 1902, *Human Duty*. Before long the single lodge had grown to over four hundred and Mrs Besant had become the Very Illustrious Vice-President, Grand Master S.:., 33°, P.M. Hon. R.W.M. No. 6 (London), Member of the Supreme Council, Gr.:. Ins.:. Gen.:. for Britain and the British Dependencies.

While Mrs Besant at home and in England was busy with Co-Masonry, with the E.S., with the Order of the Star, and with all the other picturesque and colourful preparations for the return of the Lord Maitreya or Christ, Mr Leadbeater, in his Australian exile, was not idle. He was, as usual, taking special interest in the young sons of the local Theosophists and he restlessly organized them into one society after another: In the King's Service, the Order of the Round Table, the Golden Chain. In these Mr Leadbeater, as Chief Knight-Founder Lancelot, found some slight outlet for his ritualistic leanings. But this was not enough. The ex-curate, missing the atmosphere of Adyar, in which his status had been recognized as little less than divine, needed a church. And besides, would not the World-Teacher need one when he came?

Here Mr Leadbeater, like Mrs Besant, lacked the courage to go all out for a new idea. They could not do so owing to the intensely hierarchal, authori-

MRS ANNIE BESANT

tarian, and traditionalist nature of Theosophy. Just as Mrs Besant had borrowed a name and a ritual from Freemasonry, so did Mr Leadbeater now borrow from Roman Catholicism. But all had to be in due order. Mr J. I. Wedgwood, one of Mr Leadbeater's pupils and fellow-initiates, was sent to spy out the land. He found a small body ready to his hand; this was the Old Catholic Church, a small and respectable offshoot from the parent stem, whose bishops were thought to be in the true apostolic succession. One of its clergy was a gentleman named Willoughby, whom Mr Wedgwood persuaded to consecrate him. No sooner was this done than "Bishop" Wedgwood hastened to Australia, laid anointed hands on Mr Leadbeater, and "Bishop" Leadbeater thus became acknowledged head of what in due season became the Liberal Catholic Church, which duly obtained the blessing of Mrs Besant. Henceforth all good Theosophists had yet another new movement to support.

These various bodies were still further added to. Mrs Besant was pre-occupied by the need for providing an adequate organization for the work of the World-Teacher. She tried to build up bodies which would cover all human activities, so that wherever the World-Teacher might turn he would find tools ready to his hand. Camps, amphitheatres, buildings, were prepared in various parts of the world. In Holland a young Dutchman presented to Mr Krishnamurti his house and estate, in the grounds of which was established an annual Star Camp. It was

CHALLENGE

here that Mrs Besant announced the establishment of a triple world-wide organization, a World Religion, a World University, and a World revival of the ancient mysteries. It was here too that she made public the command she had received from higher sources regarding the twelve apostles of the coming World-Teacher. Of these apostles she was allowed to name seven, herself and Mr Leadbeater, Messrs Jinarājadāsa, Arundale, Kollerstrom, a young Australian, and Wedgwood, and the young Indian wife of Mr Arundale, who was designated as World-Mother.

This was apparently the last straw for Mr Krishnamurti. For the past few years a certain restlessness had been observable in him. He had made clear his lack of sympathy with the Liberal Catholic Church and with all ceremonial and flummery. Still, he had continued in his appointed way and no serious breach was anticipated, when suddenly there occurred a startling event. By 1929 the permanent and definite occupation by the World-Teacher of Mr Krishnamurti's body was expected from day to day, and when that year's Star Camp assembled, there were not a few who expected the event to occur during its sessions.

One morning Mr Krishnamurti rose to deliver an address to the assembled campers. It could be seen at once that he was now speaking for himself and not merely as a mouthpiece; and his words confirmed the impression in no dubious manner. In short, he announced the dissolution of the Order

MRS ANNIE BESANT

of the Star and at one blow laid low the whole elaborate structure so carefully and painstakingly built up by Mrs Besant during the past eighteen years. "I maintain," said Mr Krishnamurti, "that Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect. That is my point of view, and I adhere to that absolutely and unconditionally. Truth, being limitless, unconditioned, unapproachable by any path whatsoever, cannot be organized; nor should any organization be formed to lead or to coerce people along any particular path." "A belief," he went on, "is purely an individual matter, and you cannot and must not organize it. If you do, it becomes dead, crystallized; it becomes a creed, a sect, a religion, to be imposed on others."

He declared that he did not want followers, because to follow someone meant that one ceased to follow truth. He made it unmistakably clear that his words were directed against those who had built up the elaborate structure for him. "You are accustomed to authority," he said, "or to the atmosphere of authority, which you think will lead you to spirituality. You think and hope that another can, by his extraordinary powers—a miracle—transport you to this realm of eternal freedom which is happiness. Your whole outlook on life is based on authority." "For eighteen years," he added, "you have been preparing for this event, for the coming of the World-Teacher. For eighteen years you have organized, you have looked for someone who would



Photo Topical

MR J. KRISHNAMURTI

CHALLENGE

give a new delight to your hearts and minds, who would transform your whole life, who would give you a new understanding; for someone who could raise you to a new plane of life, who would give you a new encouragement, who would set you free—and now look what is happening! Consider, reason with yourselves, and discover in what way that belief had made you different—not with the superficial difference of the wearing of a badge, which is trivial, absurd. In what manner has such a belief swept away all the unessential things of life? That is the only way to judge! In what way are you freer, greater, more dangerous to every Society which is based on the false and the unessential? In what way have the members of this organization of the Star become different?" A simple and fatal question, indeed!

Mr Krishnamurti continued: "You can form other organizations and expect someone else. With that I am not concerned, nor with creating new cages, new decorations for those cages. My only concern is to set men absolutely, unconditionally free." After this Mr Krishnamurti gave up all the possessions previously heaped upon him, and gradually severed his connection with all organizations. This severance is in a sense only superficial. The camps still continue, Mr Krishnamurti's speeches and writings are printed and published, and he has a distinct following; all this requires an organization of some kind, however nominal.

What conclusions are to be drawn from this

episode? It is at present impossible to say. Mr Krishnamurti may by a bold stroke have transferred to himself personally the allegiance that would have been given to him only as an agent and that would have been shared with the "apostles." He may be enjoying all the benefits and advantages of a leader without the trouble and labour usually involved in a position such as his. On the other hand, he may have acted in full sincerity and may be propagating views in which he honestly believes. Whichever of the two views is the true one, there is at least one thing which is clear and undoubted. For Mr Krishnamurti to have burst in so clear and uncompromising a manner the swaddling-clothes in which he had been wrapped for eighteen years, to have in a sense rejected his high destiny, to have thrown away great wealth, to have risked the loss of all his friends and disciples, boldly, in short, to have taken his life into his own hands, this was an action which must have called for quite exceptional courage and force of character. When one considers the sort of life Mr Krishnamurti had been compelled to lead since childhood, its demoralizing and tempting nature, it is impossible to withhold a tribute of admiration for the spectacle of so rare and even magnificent a gesture.

I venture to add another word to this. Mr Krishnamurti is now in a position in which he is able to do much good; the message he is bringing to the world is one which is badly needed; if he can succeed in inducing a large and influential number

CHALLENGE

of people to adopt these views and to act on them, the benefit conferred on the world would be incalculable. But Mr Krishnamurti must realize that as an advocate of Truth in the largest sense, he must himself act the Truth. He has been very frank, but he must be franker still. Up to 1929 Mr Krishnamurti's life was entangled in a complex network of far-reaching claims. Mr Krishnamurti must tell us the truth about these things, however painful it will necessarily be to discuss his past friends in public. He must, for instance, tell us the truth about the authorship of such books as *At the Feet of the Master*,¹ which appear under his name, and, what is more, he must do this during Mr Leadbeater's lifetime. I know that this is a hard task I am proposing for Mr Krishnamurti; but as he himself often tells us, truth and freedom are no luxurious mistresses, but stern calls to courage. I must say in the plainest terms, that so long as Mr Krishnamurti does not speak to us frankly about these years before 1929 he will never obtain the ear of intelligent and educated people who know such facts as those I have set out in this book. I make no apology for this appeal to Mr Krishnamurti; when the world is in such desperate straits as it is to-day we dare overlook no ameliorating message.

¹ It is an extraordinary fact and a significant one that this book, which is written in many languages and is by far the best known of his, is not so much as mentioned in Dr Lilly's *Life of Krishnamurti and his Message* (1931).

XXXI

PHŒNIX NO MORE

ANNIE BESANT was now in her eighty-third year. Five years earlier, in 1924, the fiftieth anniversary of her entry into public life had been celebrated by a great meeting in the Queen's Hall. Many of those who had been associated with or influenced by her many activities assembled to express their feelings for her. Among the speakers actually present were Mr Lansbury, the Earl de la Warr, Mr Srinivasa Sastri, Miss Margaret Bondfield, Dr Haden Guest, Mrs Pethick Lawrence, Dr Marion Phillips, Mr Ben Turner, Mr Ben Tillett, and Mr John Scurr. In addition a large number of prominent persons sent messages of congratulations. Among the most notable of these were a brilliant essay by Mr Shaw, from which I have quoted in an earlier section.

The Prime Minister, Mr MacDonald, wrote: "Nothing would have given me greater pleasure than to have been present at the Queen's Hall to join with those who will be there in celebrating Mrs Besant's fifty years of public work. They have been years of much strife, as all pioneering years must be. The forerunner must accept flints and thorns and look far ahead for rest and peace. These generally come in the end, because, however

PHŒNIX NO MORE

easily stampeded the public may be when ideas are glaringly new, it gets accustomed to them by and by, and recognizes how much truth and wisdom there are in them. Then the poor buffeted pioneer is accepted. A desire to allow bygones to be bygones greets him, and at last well-won honour settles about him. Thus it has been with Mrs Besant. She has had the satisfaction of living through much and, perhaps what is the still greater satisfaction, she sees, after all her triumphs, that there is plenty of room in the future for pioneers to carry on her unaccomplished work. When one has been fifty years in public life I doubt if there is a greater consolation than to look back on the past with satisfaction, recognizing its achievements, and at the same time to look forward with hope, recognizing the tremendous efforts which must still be put forth for progress."

Lord Haldane wrote that Mrs Besant's life had been "one of high public spirit and strenuous purpose in its execution." Mr Philip Snowden said that "no woman of this generation has devoted supreme gifts of oratory and intellect to great humanitarian causes with such energy and disinterestedness as Mrs Besant." At the meeting itself such expressions were multiplied and for the time being all differences were dropped to render homage to this remarkable woman.

Mrs Besant made an impressive figure on the platform. Usually, almost invariably, she stood alone on the platform when speaking in public, as

MRS ANNIE BESANT

if to mark her aloofness and self-sufficiency. She needed no Chairman to introduce her, for who did not know her? No one was needed to prompt her, for with no more than a couple of notes in the palm of her hand, she spoke without hesitation or faltering. There was no need for anxious glances to be directed at the clock, for Mrs Besant started on the minute, and if she did not cease for an hour and a half or more, well, her audience was always ready for more. When she was young her beauty and sincerity carried all before them; in middle age her fiery oratory swept away all obstacles; in old age it was sheer admiration for an indomitable spirit which swayed the audience.

On this occasion the spectacle was therefore all the more impressive. Mrs Besant in her old age, with short white hair, and wearing a simple white sari, with a string of crystal beads, sat surrounded with friends, was garlanded with flowers, and spoke briefly and with emotion. Yet her remarks were typical of herself in many respects. They will serve far better than any words of mine to throw light on her outlook. I reproduce in full the words she spoke on this occasion of her jubilee:

“Friends: It is very difficult for me to speak after I have stood—or rather sat—here listening to all the generous and loving words that have been spoken to me to-night. And as one old friend was spoken of after another, with whom it had been my privilege and my happiness to work, as allusions were made to Charles Bradlaugh—to Herbert Burrows—and

PHENIX NO MORE

to so many with whose friendship I have been blessed, and who have passed out of the physical side but still remain the living souls I know, the Hall has almost seemed to be more full of invisible than of the visible, crowding to give one word of cheer to an Old Comrade whom they have left behind. And then my thoughts ran back to the days when I was still a child, and when—for I was a child fond of reading heroic stories, stories of great fights for truth, for justice and for freedom—my heart used to sink within me as I thought: ‘The heroic days are over, and there is nothing left to look forward to, of struggle, of heroism, of noble work’—for so the children dream! And I would say to those of you who are young to-day: Look forward to a future full of nobler tasks that you may do, that we have left undone: full of greater causes that you may serve; that we have not been able to find: for humanity is ever young, though men and women may grow old, and humanity is ever rising higher and higher when her children serve her generation after generation: for the world renews her youth and the age that is behind gives birth to the age that is to come. And some have said that I am young. Yes! Because there is no age for those who strive to live in the ETERNAL.

“Some have spoken to-night about work, about sacrifice; but I wonder whether all of you know, as I know, now that my body is old, that there is no joy like the joy of sacrifice for a great Cause? That there is no sorrow in it, but the bliss which comes

MRS ANNIE BESANT

from the privilege of working for that which is greater than one's self. And I remember—in those days when I had lost the faith of my childhood and had not yet reached onward to the greater faith that I embraced one-and-thirty years ago, and that grows for ever brighter and brighter, more certain and more certain as the years go on—I remember when Herbert Burrows and myself were walking in London streets, going back from a meeting of omnibus-men who had no time to join and work and plan for shorter hours, and we could only find them about midnight, and as we tramped through the snow and the mud I turned to him and said: 'Herbert, I wonder why on earth we go on doing this,' and his answer was: 'We can't help it!' And in that there is a great truth, for the God who unfolds within us pushes us onwards even when our eyes are blinded to His Glory, and it is He who is the only worker, He who is the only sacrifice, He who living in our hearts is the only inspiration to Service; and just as we come to know that that is true, then it is that we know that nothing that our bodies and our brains and our hearts can do is our work at all, for all work is His alone and there is none other. And we realize that we work in His power and He is never weak: in His strength, and He is never feeble; in His youth, the strong immortal Youth who never grows old. And I would say to every one of you that that power dwells within you, and that Strength is the strength of the Divine Spirit and the body is only the temple of the Living God; and then you will realize that it

PHŒNIX NO MORE

is not you that works, but it is He! It is not you who plan, but He who plans, and that all you have to do is to make yourselves a channel for that mighty Life in which the Universe is living. And who shall dare to say that anyone in whom that life abides—and He abides in every one of you—that you cannot make a new Heaven and a new Earth by the Christ and the God within you, for whom alone you can ever be strong, by whom alone you can ever conquer the obstacles in the way.

“And that would be my word to the young and the old among you: Trust the Divine Life within you and the Divine Life within your fellow-men, realize that it is in you and you will see it so in every one around you. Then you will doubt no longer.

“And—if I may finish with words which I believe to be intensely true, and that are so often left only half said—when Kipling spoke about the East and the West and ‘never the twain shall meet,’ he went on to say:—

‘But there is neither East nor West,
Border, nor Breed nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face,
Though they come from the ends of the earth.’

“And that is true, whether they be from Britain or from India. Whether it be from one side of the world to the other, there is only one Life, and we are one in Him, and we shall bring the outer lands together because the Inner Life is ever one.”

MRS ANNIE BESANT

Many felt then that Mrs Besant's active life was at an end. She herself thought otherwise, as we have seen. She did not merely continue her work. She multiplied and extended it for another four or five full and active years. She did not even hesitate boldly to announce that she would not die until India had secured Home Rule. But now the end had come. Undefeated by continuous and bitter opposition, by scandal, by all the manifold difficulties of her life, and by old age itself, the defection of Mr Krishnamurti was a blow from which she could not recover. She did her best to show a cheerful face to the world, and began a process of explaining away. She, who had hundreds of times warned her followers against imposing their own views on the World-Teacher, who had pointed to the disastrous effects of distorting the teachings of previous World-Teachers, she now began to "interpret" the words of Mr Krishnamurti. When he laughed at Theosophical jargon, she smilingly said that it would be hasty to assume that he used the word jargon in a deprecatory sense. When he outspokenly condemned all ceremonial and that of the Liberal Catholic Church in particular, Mrs Besant ceased to attend its services but held that it was still permissible for the other apostles to continue to celebrate Liberal Catholic rites.

Yet the blow was more than she could bear. She fell ill, recovered, fell seriously ill, partly recovered, lay for many months barely conscious of her surroundings, seen by only a few close friends, and

PHŒNIX NO MORE

died on 20 September 1933. She was cremated, and Mr Jinarājadāsa issued a valedictory statement in which he described her as warrior, orator-artist, philosopher, statesman, saint, and gem of womanliness.

XXXII

ABSTRACT

WHEN attempting to evaluate her life one longs for something of Mrs Besant's own clairvoyant gifts: mere intelligence and research, while they enable us to pose the problem, as yet hardly enable us to solve it. The fervently religious girl who turned freethinker; the passionate atheist who became a Theosophist; the woman who prided herself on her sensitive conscience and rigid devotion to truth, and who yet was the disciple of Mme Blavatsky and the obstinate friend of Mr Leadbeater; the woman who renounced politics and the world, only to become President of the Indian National Congress; the woman who made endless sacrifices to promote a beneficent cause, and then utterly repudiated it; the woman who pitilessly exposed the follies of ceremonial and organized religion, only to become a Co-Mason, a Liberal Catholic, and a score of similar things; the woman who claimed to arrive at her decisions by cold reason, and yet swayed to every emotion and acted on the instructions of imaginary Himalayan Masters—by what formula is such a compound to be described, by what generalization to be elucidated? I have tried during the progress of the story to explain some of the more difficult

ABSTRACT

episodes in Mrs Besant's life; but even if I have succeeded in these particular instances, this is by no means equivalent to a general interpretation.

On scrutinizing Mrs Besant's life for characteristics which persisted throughout all outward permutations, we can, I think, find more than one. The chief of these seems to be an utter self-confidence. Mrs Besant was one of the most completely extraverted individuals of an extraverted epoch; the inward doubts and uncertainties of the twentieth century were as foreign to her as is pole to pole. When young she felt, for a short time, doubts about religious belief, though even then she was absolutely confident as to the importance of those doubts; after that she was always sure about all things. Nor did she at any time feel any doubts about herself, her abilities and her destiny. At first she had supreme confidence in her righteousness and in her intellectual attainments; the former persisted, but the latter was transformed into an explicit confidence in her intuitions and in her supernal sources of information—but always she *knew*. Consequently criticism could never touch her, nor could she profit by it. Throughout her life a criticism was to her the same thing as an attack, and she reacted accordingly. It is from this characteristic that springs the monstrous authoritarianism introduced by her into Theosophy. From this springs her record both of obstinate pertinacity and of radical change. Her supreme self-confidence presented a great resistance to any change of opinion; but once that resistance

MRS ANNIE BESANT

overcome, the new opinion had all the authority of the old. Hence the long periods during which she adhered to each of her successive *Weltanschauungen*; hence also the suddenness and the completeness of each change to the next.

Another constant characteristic was Mrs Besant's capacity, even hunger, for work. Below the conscious levels of her mind, which she kept in rigid control, it is not at all speculative to imagine a whirlpool of conflicting emotions. This whirlpool had to be dammed at all cost, and this could only be done by keeping her conscious mind continuously active. She was ceaselessly, pitilessly driven by the restless dæmon within her. When she could not work she became restless, irritable, censorious. From time to time in her long and healthy life she fell seriously ill. Each illness followed, and I venture to suggest was a refuge from, a particularly acute emotional crisis. An illness followed the early storm of doubt; another the end of her litigation with her husband; another the early Theosophical warfare; another the beginning of Mr Krishnamurti's secession; and so on.

Courage was another aspect of Mrs Besant's character which was apparent at all times. It is hardly necessary to illustrate this fact: it is evident from every action and period of her life. When she left her husband on a point of conscience, when she became a freethinker, when she joined Bradlaugh, when she fought for birth-control, when she joined the Theosophical Society, when she stood by Mr

ABSTRACT

Leadbeater, and a hundred and one other incidents in her life, all testify to her possession of moral and mental courage of a quite exceptional order.

These three qualities appear sufficiently to account for the phenomenon of Mrs Besant's career. For Mrs Besant was not a woman possessed of that magic force of personality which in itself leaves a mark on the world; she was far too aloof and self-contained for that. She made no such effect on her contemporaries as did Bradlaugh, for instance, whose personality was such that those who knew him still speak of him with something of love and awe. Those who knew Mrs Besant as contemporaries think of her merely as an honest, energetic, able and eloquent woman. She lacked the magic touch. Nor had Mrs Besant great intellect, though she was without doubt a woman of quite exceptional ability. She had a great facility for absorbing information, mastering it, and giving it out again in lucid terms. But abstractions, generalizations, philosophical thought, even analytical acuteness, were beyond her; and we have seen how repeatedly fallible was her judgement.

Thus when the immense body of Mrs Besant's writings is examined it must be confessed that there is not one amongst them which is touched by the genuine fire of poetry or inspiration or scientific vision, not one that seems at all likely to go down to posterity. For nearly sixty years she wrote and spoke in a spate that scarcely ceased. She produced about four hundred books and pamphlets, and at least five thousand articles, probably many more.

MRS ANNIE BESANT

In this great mass of printed matter there is much that is true, much that is valuable, much even that is wise; but there is not a consecutive page of true constructive vision. Mrs Besant as a public figure was endowed, exceptionally endowed, at almost every point but one; she was devoid of the creative spirit of a Defoe or a Shaw, to mention only two publicists to whom she had many points of resemblance.

In a summary such as this it is almost inevitable that defects should be stressed at the expense of virtues. I should be sorry to leave that impression. For though it plainly seems to impartial scrutiny that Mrs Besant's end failed of the promise of its beginning, and that as a whole her life did not achieve any great constructive benefit for mankind, yet the spectacle of so much indomitable purpose, such untiring energy, and such selfless courage, is one which must move even the most critical to an admiration deep enough to gloss over far more serious defects than any ever owned by Annie Besant.

THE END

INDEX

According to St John, 50
 Accollas, Emile, his *The Idea of God in the Revolution*, 101
Ancient Wisdom, The, 176
 Anthroposophical Society, the, 240
 Arnold, Matthew, 41
 Arundale, G S, 237, 253
At the Feet of the Master, 257
 Atheism, 2-4, 60, 101, 130-2, the approach to, 37-51
Autobiographical Sketches, 38 n, 131
Autobiography, 38 n, 194
 Aveling, Dr E B, 102-3, 113

 Bakewell, Mr Justice, 239
 Besant, Arthur Digby (son), 2, 10, 34, 35 n, 37, 41, 99-100
 Besant, Rev Frank (husband), 2, 31-3, 49-51, 95-100
 Besant (afterwards Scott), Mabel Emily (daughter), 2, 37, 51, 95-100
 Besant family, the, 10, 32
 Bettanely, M C, 155
Bhagavad-Gita, The, 176
Birth of New India, The, 200
 Birth-control, 3, 59, 81-94
 Blackburn, Mr Justice, 108-9
 Blavatsky, Helena Petrovna, 4, 91, 129 ff, 196, 204, 210, 228, 231, 235, 266
 Blavatsky Lodge, the, 169, 231
 Bondfield, Margaret, 258
 Bradlaugh, Charles, 3-4, 53, 55-62, 72-5, 82-90, 102-6, 110-15, 119, 121, 123, 131
 Bradlaugh, Hypatia, 103, 113
 Bramwell, Lord Justice, 90
 Brett, Lord Justice, 90
 British Museum, the, 138
 Brooke, Stopford, 41

Bruno, Giordano, 63, 218
 Bryant and May, Messrs, 124-5
 Büchner, Ludwig, his works, 104, 112
Burden on Labour, A, 132
 Burns, John, 122
 Burrows, Herbert, 110, 125, 169, 232, 262

 Caroline, Queen, 8
 Carpenter, Edward, 113
 Central Hindu College and School, the, 5, 198, 199, 240
 Chakravarti, G N, 175, 205
 Charing Cross Parliament, the, 121
 Chemistry, occult, 205-9
 Cherbuliez, Victor, 112-13
 Chirol, Sir Valentine, 196-7
 Christian Evidence Society, the, 84, 88
Christian Progress, 95
Christian Year, Keble's, 15
Civil and Religious Liberty, 101
 Clairvoyance, 11, 12, 169-70, 184, 187, 204-21
 Cobbe, Frances Power, 42, 113
 Cockburn, Lord Chief Justice, 84-90, 95
Coercion in Ireland, 101
 Colenso, John William, 11
 Co-Masonry, 5, 246, 250-1
Commonweal, The, 199, 200
 Commonwealth of India Bill, the, 202, 247
 Congress League, the, 200
Congress Speeches, 200
 Conway, Mrs Moncure, 55
 Cotter, Lord Justice, 90
Creature of Croton and Parliament, A, 132
 Cubitt, Messrs, 126

 De la Warr, Earl, 258

INDEX

- Dennis, Mrs, 222-3
Discourse on Religion, Parker's, 42
Droit Humain, Le, 250-1
- Eddy brothers, the, 147
 Education, Mrs Besant's, and her theories of, 1, 3, 19-29, 98, 102-4, 195-6, 198-9
England, India and Afghanistan, 101
England's Jubilee Gift to Ireland, 102
English Land System, The, 111
Esoteric Christianity, 176
 Esoteric Section, the, of the Theosophical Society, 164, 172, 174-5, 177, 192 n., 210 n., 226, 227, 235, 240, 241, 250
Euthanasia, 54
Evolution of Life and Form, 176
Evolution of Society, The, 116
Eyes and Ears, 104
- Fabian Society, the, 4, 118-20, 134, 168
Family Herald, The, 2, 35-6
Fasting Communion, 34-5
 Fathers, the, 16
 Fellowship of Faiths, the, 247
 Fenian troubles, the 107-10
For India's Uplift, 200
Force no Remedy, 101
Four Great Religions, 176
Free Trade versus "Fair" Trade, 111
 Freemasonry, 5
 Freethought, 2-4, 54-5, 60 ff., 101, 130-2; the approach to, 37-51
 Freethought Publishing Company, the, 82, 191
Fruits of Christianity, The, 95
Fruits of Philosophy, Knowlton's, 81-91, 95, 97
Future of Indian Politics, The, 203
- Gifford, Sir Hardinge, 84-8
 Golden Chain, the, 251
Gordon Judged out of his own Mouth, 101-2
Gospel of Atheism, The, 62-4
 Gospels, the historicity of the, 17-18
- Grahame, Cunninghame, 122
 Great Exhibition, the, 1
 Greg, William Rathbone, 41
 Guest, Dr Haden, 258
- Haldane, Lord, on Mrs Besant, 259
 Hall of Science, the, 55, 60, 76, 102, 103, 104, 130, 170
 Hatherley, Baron, 9, 40
 Headlam, Rev. S. D., 133
 Heber, Dr Lilly, 257
 Hindu University, the, 5, 198
History of the Great French Revolution, 101
 Hodgson, Dr Richard, 156
 Home Rule League, the, 200
How a World Teacher Comes, 243
How India Wrought for Freedom, 200-1
Human Duty, 251
 Hyndman, H. M., 112
 Hypatia, 218
 Hypnotism, 172-3
- In the King's Service, 251
In the Outer Court, 176
India: Bound or Free?, 203
India: A Nation, 201
India and the Empire, 200
Indian Art, 203
 Indian politics, 4, 5, 191-203
 Inner Group, the, 172
Investigator, The, 57
Is Christianity a Success?, 132
Is the Bible Indictable?, 95
Isis Unveiled, 155
- Jessel, Sir George, 96-9
 Jinarājādāsa, Kuruppumullagē, 204-5, 207, 229, 253, 265
 Jones, Ernest, 107-8
 Judge, W. Q., 170, 174-5
- Karma*, 176
 Katscher, Leopold, 113
 Keble, John, 15, 16
 Keightley, Bertram, 207, 224, 226
 Kipling, Rudyard, 263
 Knowlton, Dr Charles, 81-91, 95, 97
 Krishnamurti, J., 4, 5, 205, 210, 235-46, 251-7, 264

INDEX

Landlords, Tenant Farmers, and Laborers, 110-11
Lansbury, George, on Mrs Besant, 126, 258
Law of Population, The, 90, 91, 102
Layard, Gertrude, 113
Leadbeater, Charles Webster, 163, 164, 184, 204 ff.
Letters to a Young Indian Prince, 203
Liberal Catholic Church, the, 247, 251-2, 264
Liddon, Henry Parry, 16, 41
Life, Death, and Immortality, 132
Light, Heat and Sound, 104
Link, The, 124
Lives of Alcione, The, 213
Livingstone, David, 23
London Building Trades Federation, the, 127
London School Board, the, 4, 125, 126, 168
London Secular Society, 57
Lucifer, 169, 176

MacDonald, J. Ramsay, on Mrs Besant, 258-9
Malthusian League, the, 247
Man Whence, How and Whither, 213
Man and his Bodies, 176
Mann, Emma, 25
Mann, Tom, on Mrs Besant, 76-7
Mansel, Henry Longueville, 41
Marryat, Florence, 19 n
Marryat, Captain Frederick, 19
Marryat, Miss, 1, 13-16, 18, 19-29
Massey, C C, 148
Matchgirls' strike and union, the, 124-5, 168
Mead, G R S, 172 n, 224-5
Mellor, Mr Justice, 84, 89
"Miracle Club," the, 147, 155
Moffat, Robert, 23
Morris family, the, 6
Moses, Rev W Stainton, 148
My Path to Atheism, 101
Myth of the Resurrection, The, 132

Narayaniah, Mr, 235-40
National Congress of India, the, 5, 193, 202, 266
National Reformer, The, 55, 57, 58, 73, 75, 82, 112, 121
National Secular Society, 55, 73, 74, 103, 168
National Secular Society's Almanack, The, 73
Natural History of the Christian Devil, The, 132
Natural Religion versus Revealed Religion, 53
Nesbit, E, 113
New India, 200, 201
Newman, Francis, 42

Ojai Valley community, the, 245-6
Olcott, Colonel Henry Steele, 129, 147, 148-56, 168, 174-6, 196-7, 210, 224-6, 229-30, 250
Old Catholic Church, the, 252
On the Atonement, 53
On the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth, 50
On Eternal Torture, 53
On Inspiration, 53
On the Mediation and Salvation of Ecclesiastical Christianity, 54
On the Nature and Existence of God, 54, 62
On Prayer, 54
On the Religious Education of Children, 53
Oratory, 59, 66, 72-80, 245-8, 260-4
Order of the Rising Sun of India, 236-7
Order of the Round Table, the, 251
Order of the Star in the East, the, 237, 241, 245, 253-5
Our Corner, 112-16, 124, 131, 133

Pall Mall Gazette, 133
Paper on the Duty of Fasting, A, 34
Paradise Lost, 12, 15, 16
Parker, Theodore, 42
Parliamentary Reform League, 58
Path of Discipleship, The, 176
Pedigree of Man, The, 176
Phillips, Dr Marion, 258
Physics, occult, 205-9

INDEX.

- Physiology of Home*, 104
Pilgrim's Progress, 12
 "Political Status of Women, The," 75
 Pusey, Edward Bouverie, 16, 44-7

 Quin, Malcolm, on Mrs Besant, 77

Redistribution of Political Power, The, 115
 Reform Bills, the, 115
 Roberts, C. E. Bechhofer, 144 n., 145
 Roberts, "Lawyer," 107-8
 Robertson, Frederick William, 41
 Robertson, J. M., 113

 Saints, the Black Letter, 2, 36
 Sastri, Srinivasa, 258
 Schiller's *William Tell*, 22
 Scott, Mr and Mrs Thomas, 2, 3, 48, 50, 52-4
 Scurr, John, on Mrs Besant, 125, 258
Secret Doctrine, The, 4, 136-42, 157, 158
Self and its Sheaths, The, 176
 Seymour, Digby, 108
 Shaw, George Bernard, 112, 113, 121, 270; on Mrs Besant; 118-21, 258
Short Glossary of Theosophical Terms, A, 169
 Sinnett, A. P., 135, 204, 205
Sins of the Church, The, 132
 Socialism and social reform, 3-4, 107-28
 Socialist Defence Association, the, 122
 Society for Psychical Research, the, 148, 156, 229
Some Problems of Life, 176
 South Place Institution, 101
 Spiritualism, 135-6, 145, 147
 Stanley, Arthur Penrhyn, 11, 41, 52
 Stead, W. T., 4, 33, 124, 133, 136
 Steiner, Rudolf, 178, 240
Story of Afghanistan, The, 101, 191
Story of the Soudan, The, 102
Study in Consciousness, A, 176
 Suggestion, 172-3
Sunday at Home, 23
 "Sunshine and Shade," 35-6

 Theosophical Publishing House, 176, 248
 Theosophical Society, the, 4, 126, 129 ff.
Theosophist, The, 129
 Theosophy, 4-5, 91-4, 129 ff.
 Thomson, James, 113
Thought Power, 176
 Tillett, Ben, 258
Times, The, 84, 85, 96 n., 97-8
 Tingley, Mrs K., 175, 178
To my Brothers and Sisters in India, 202
 Trade Unionism, 124-8
 Trafalgar Square fracas, the, 122-3
 Turgenieff, Iwan, 113
 Turner, Ben, 258
 Tyler, Sir Henry, 103

 Van Hook, Dr Weller, 231-3
 Voysey, Mr and Mrs Charles, 2, 41-2, 50

Wake up, India, 200
 Wallas, Graham, 113
 Walter, John, 84
 Warren, Sir Charles, 122
 Watts, Charles, 82
 Webb, Sidney, 113
 Wedgwood, J. I., 252, 253
Why I am a Socialist, 116
Why I became a Theosophist, 133, 170
Why I do not Believe in God, 132, 133
William Tell, Schiller's, 22
 Williams, Gertrude M., 77 n.
 Willingdon, Viscount, 203
Woman's Position according to the Bible, 132
 Wood, Emily Roche (mother), 6, 11-12, 19-20, 27-9, 30, 52
 Wood, General Sir Evelyn, 9
 Wood, Sir Henry Trueman, 10, 51
 Wood, Rev. Sir John Page, 8
 Wood, Sir Matthew, 8
 Wood, Robert Wright, 9
 Wood, Western, 9
 Wood, William Burton Persse (father), 9-10, 11-12
World and its Gods, The, 132
World without God, A, 132
 World-teacher, the, 4, 5, 205, 210, 235-44, 251-7, 264
 "World-Teacher and the New Civilization, The" 246

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
THE EDINBURGH PRESS
EDINBURGH

